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ABSTRACT

A study identified stages of student writing maturation across several grades and developed classroom resources to enhance the maturation of students. A total of 3,600 essays written by students in grades 4 and 6-12 attending urban and rural schools in eastern Ontario, Canada, were holistically scored. The original limited and quite specific design of the study was altered, since each school system that agreed to participate had its own agenda. Analysis of narrative, fantasy, and explanatory essays investigated what students do (and do not do) when they write, how well they do it for particular features, and the relationship between the exhibition of particular features and stages in writing maturation. Descriptive analyses of the essays indicated that: (1) for personal narratives, the average performance at grade 8 was equal to that of grade 9 advanced students; (2) for writing fantasy, few students above grade 6 were willing to risk the imaginative (fantastical) enterprise; and (3) for explanatory writing, stages of maturation did not seem as pronounced as they did for personal narrative--most aspects of the task seemed to be well within the ability of many writers by grade 6. Based on the findings of the study, supplementary units for the writing program responsive to the stages discerned were developed. Additionally, in response to patterns of error frequency discerned, unit series for the sentence, the verb, and spelling were developed. (Essay prompts, categories and scales for descriptive analysis, 11 tables of data, and an error frequency study for grades 4-10 are attached.) (RS)

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STAGES IN WRITING MATURATION

GRADES 4 - 12

Peter J. A. Evans

Project Director

Revised version of the presentation at the National Council of Teachers of English, Seattle, November 1991

Presentation at Seattle was deliberately informal: only highlights of the following reports were given and a brief introduction was made to the types of units we have developed for the writing program in response to the maturation stages identified.

The two reports here are of the "Descriptive Analysis" of the writing in three modes and of an Error Frequency Study for Grades 4 - 10 in one mode. (A less formal report in the "Point of View" mode of writing is also available.) Unit series for all four modes have now been developed.

The present reports are based on writing in four school systems in Eastern Ontario over 1990-91.

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June, 1992

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STAGES OF WRITING MATURATION

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Peter J. A. Evans

1. ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

It must be for nearly a century now that we have been trying on many fronts to improve our methods for assessing writing both reliably and descriptively, searching for a practical combination of both.

As a practising secondary school teacher I soon knew all about assessing writing, for of course I had unerring instincts and, in my time, the further guidance and prescription of the annual report of the Ontario Ministry of Education on the Grade 13 external English Composition examination. I knew quite precisely, therefore, what a "First" was and a "Pass"; I knew all the MAJOR errors (three of which in an essay equalled failure) and a fascinating compendium of MINOR errors. This, of course, was all in the way of producing accurate marks and maintaining standards. With the collapse of the external examination system and, as the newspapers and universities proclaimed, a corresponding collapse of standards, we were deprived of the infallible wisdom of the Ministry of Education.

The experienced teachers (almost all now retired) were left with their memories; and their students, now the teachers, with the memory of their experiences as victims - all productive of unreliability and a "deficit" or "red circle" model of writing assessment: What's left that's any good when one has caught all the errors.

Meantime educational research went on with increased interest in large scale assessment: what is performance in a system? a province or state? a nation? And what characterizes or tends to characterize the writing that we are judging?

This is not an historical study on large-scale assessment of writing. I want to note only two points: first, that essentially three useful "systems" emerged, and, second, that rich accurate description of what students do when they write is not consistent with a high degree of reliability in scoring. You can't get both at once.

The three systems that emerged were **holistic** (rapid impression) **scoring**, **analytic scoring**, and a variety of forms of what I am calling here **"descriptive analysis"** - the most famous of which is "primary trait" scoring as employed in the American National Assessment of Educational Progress. This last was introduced in the second round, not because holistic scoring was inaccurate and inefficient, but because descriptors did not and could not emerge from it.

Two further kinds of analysis (not related to the essay as a whole) have been studies of **error frequency** and measures of **syntactic maturity**.

In my work in large scale writing assessment over the past 15 years or so, I have employed each of these types of scoring and descriptive reporting:

	Interface	OISE WEP	OAIP	COU	NWT	W.Mat.Proj.
Yrs.	1976	1976-80	1981	1982	1985-91	1990-91
Grades	12-13	7-12	7-10	entrance	6 & 9	4-12
	Ont.sample	mult.system	Ont.sample	3 univs.	all NWT	4 systems
Holistic	*	*	*	*	*	*
Analytic		*	*		*	
Desc.Analysis					*	*
Error Cts	*	*	*		*	*
Synt. Mat.	*	*			* ('85)	

My experiences with and judgements concerning each appear in reports of the earlier projects and in resources developed (OISE Writing Evaluation Project; Northwest Territories) for teachers from those projects. I make only the following brief notes here for three of the five:

Analytic scoring is well defined and rationalized by Paul Diederich in **Measuring Growth in Writing**, NCTE, 1974 and my own work with it has been much as he outlines except that in our projects we elaborated criteria more specifically for each writing mode; his versions are in the right direction but all too general. The problem for large scale assessment is that analytic scoring is time consuming without being reliable, or, for subsequent analysis particularly helpful descriptively. Its appropriate use, I think, is in the classroom rather than in large-scale assessment.

I have found syntactic maturity measures a waste of time (the game of defining and counting T-units, etc.). While it may be true that students age 16 tend to write longer sentences (and T-units) than do students age 10, the "So what?" question supervenes. And few would argue that longer is better. My efforts, unsuccessful, to make a modest mound out of this molehill appear in my 1979 study following the OISE writing project and the Interface project and in my report of the first year (1985) study of Northwest Territories writing at Grade 9.

In most of my studies, including the present, I have made a study of error frequency based on a random sample stratified by (holistic) score: Following an initial effort at an exhaustive classification of error types (see again my 1979 study) I confined myself to a more restricted range of errors. In the current study this was taken on personal narrative (Grade 4, 6, 8, 9, 10) only. The report is provided separately.

The error frequency count is undertaken quite independently of any assessment of individual essays. One is looking here for patterns across students within a grade, and across grades. Which errors tend largely to disappear over time? Which do not? What is the real situation here? Does it correspond with the general media perception? No, it doesn't, and there are patterns worth attention, and I commend the error frequency report to the reader's attention; as well, the units we have developed for The Sentence, The Verb, and Spelling as a result of the analysis.

HOLISTIC SCORING:

This now very popular as well as rapid and reliable method of scoring takes two forms: (1) What I call the "slot" method where points on whatever scale are pre-defined (often with "anchor"

essays on which scorers are trained) and the essays judged as to slot. This is generally the ETS method, adopted by New Brunswick over several years of provincial writing assessment and virtually routinized in Alberta. Here it is pre-determined what must characterize the essay to receive such and such a score, (2) The ranking method in which an extensive scale (8 or 10 points) is employed and essays are simply ranked against the others on that scale. There will be some 1's, some 2's ... some 10's. The definitive work here is the Schools Council study (1966) by Britton et al. in which they compared the reliability of holistic scoring against the traditional form, devastating the latter on reliability.

It is the ranking method I have used exclusively, with a 10-point scale rather than an 11, minimum of two scorers (a practical limit: 3 would be the best compromise between efficiency and reliability) with buried essays in each set for calibrating scorers, and refereeing of discrepancies. This has worked well.

Student, school and grade (in cross-grade studies) are masked and essays shuffled into sets of about 50 for scoring. Topics and modes are not mixed (the Interface study being an ignoble exception); the scorers are comparing writing all of which is in response to the same prompt.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS:

As earlier noted, holistic scoring provides no information about what's going on in the writing. It is not, therefore, appropriate at the classroom level - only in large-scale assessment. In the version of holistic scoring I employed **all** we know at the end is which writing is (relatively) better and which worse, but at least we know that with some accuracy.

Any description of performance is subsequent: for example, through exhibited essays what tends to characterize a "3" or a "6", or the "mid-range". Or, with a random sample stratified by holistic score, error frequencies as noted above, or analytic scoring against a set of criteria each on a convenient scale - as employed and reported in several of my studies.

But these criteria, even when adapted to the mode, remain vague and restricted. We need a good deal more in the way of descriptive detail if we are to comprehend what students do, seem able to do, or seem ready (or not yet ready) to do. Any reporting of performance that has any likelihood of affecting program in pertinent ways must provide such detailed information.

Hence, the "primary trait" approach in the NAEP attracted me. (See an excellent description by Lloyd-Jones in Evaluating Writing, 1977). It, too, was very limited: a few traits - presumably those of interest to the Americans - each on a scale. Though the procedures were not so formal, I was even more attracted by explorations by Dixon and Stratta and by Dixon and Farmer of a variety of modes of writing in the U.K. - some of it post-event discussion and re-analysis of essays in formal examinations. The stress here, as I suppose to a degree with the NAEP, was discovery rather than deficit marking.

So, over my years conducting the NWT writing assessment, we explored a number of variations of descriptive analysis across the modes employed here, refining our strategy and our record sheets a little more each time. In the course of the present study we have made a few further

adjustments.

As one may see on viewing the record sheets appended, there is no interest in producing a score (the scoring has been done holistically), but a good deal in tracking "what's happening": what did the student do? - often simply a checkoff of an approach taken or a strategy employed. For some features, also, how well (here with a scale). This collection of strategies which I have, not very imaginatively, renamed **descriptive analysis**, proves quite useful in developing a picture of what students do and in providing some indices of writing maturation.

2. A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

J. N. Britton, N. C. Martin, H. Rosen: **Multiple Marking of English Compositions**, Examinations Bulletin #12, Schools Council, UK, 1966.

In my judgement the definitive work on holistic scoring.

P. B. Diederich: **Measuring Growth in English**, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, 1974.

Especially valuable on analytic scoring.

John Dixon & Leslie Stratta: **Writing Narrative - and Beyond**, Canadian Council of Teachers of English, Ottawa, 1986.

This is an expansion of Dixon and Stratta's observations on writing and writing assessment for the Southern Regional Examinations Board in the U.K. Both were involved in writing observations, in pamphlet form (for SREB and the Schools Council), during the early 1980's across a wide range of writing modes including "Argument" (Point of View), Explanation, Fantasy, and Personal Narrative. See especially Teaching and Assessing Argument, SREB, 1982.

P. Evans, P. Brown, M. Marsh: **Criteria for the Evaluation of Student Writing, Grades 7 & 8: A Handbook**, OISE Press, Toronto, 1977.

Criteria for analytic scoring developed by teachers in association with the OISE Writing Evaluation Project.

P. Evans: **The Evaluation of Writing: Grades 8, 12 and 13**, Review and Evaluation Bulletin, Vol. 1, #2, Ministry of Education - Ontario, 1979.

Application of analytic scoring measures of syntactic maturity and error frequency in a study of Grade 12 writing in the Interface study (see Traub et al. below) and Grade 8 in the OISE Writing Evaluation Project.

P. Evans and M. Holmes: **The Ontario Test of English Achievement: The Final Report on Its Development**, Council of Ontario Universities, Toronto, 1982.

P. Evans: **Northwest Territories Assessments Grades 6 and 9**, 1985 - 1991. Each final report is available from Northwest Territories Education in Yellowknife.

(A) ANNUAL REPORTS

Grade 9 in 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988; Grade 6 in 1989; Grade 9 in 1991 (with a comparison with 1986 performance). In most years a report on analytic scoring appears. First experiments with descriptive analysis occurred in 1985 - refined by 1987.

(B) TEACHER RESOURCES:

(i) **Writing - the Junior High Years: Teacher Guide**, NWT Education, 1988. Includes a study of patterns, applications of analytic scoring, introduction to descriptive analysis (labelled here still as "primary trait").

(ii) A series of units for the writing program (like the series developed in the present project). Still "in press".

Richard Lloyd-Jones: "Primary Trait Scoring", pp. 33-68 in C. R. Cooper & L. Odell: **Evaluating Writing - Describing, Measuring, Judging**, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, 1977.

The key essay on primary trait scoring as employed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

L. D. McLean: **Report of the 1981** [Ontario Assessment Instrument Pool] **Field Trials in English & Mathematics - Intermediate Division**, Ministry of Education - Ontario, 1982.

Includes reporting of holistic scoring and error counts of 7-10 writing across Ontario "Trouble always starts ..." and "How to shop ..." were employed.

R. Traub, R. Wolfe, C. Wolfe, P. Evans, H. H. Russell: **Nature of Students** (2 Volumes) - Report #2 of the Secondary - Postsecondary **Interface** Study, Ministries of Education and of Colleges and Universities - Ontario, 1976.

The detailed study of writing performance appears in the second volume.

3. THE PRESENT CONTEXT

The objectives of this project were fundamentally two: to identify stages of student maturation across several non-adjacent grades (6, 8, 10, 12) and then to develop classroom resources tied quite specifically to our discoveries in order to enhance the maturation of those students ready to leap ahead and of those who seemed stalled.

The design was limited and quite specific - a few classes at each grade noted (including the 3 streams at 10 and 12), preferably from the same families of schools across an urban and rural range. We would specify who would write what, pull in these relatively few essays (ca. 600 in each of 3 or 4 modes), score them holistically with a trained team, and descriptively analyze a random sample stratified by score and grade/level: manageable but a sufficient number to give a fairly good sense of what characterizes writing at Grade 6 against Grade 8, etc. and of what characterizes the better writing as defined by score.

It didn't work out that way. Each system in Eastern Ontario that did agree to participate each had its own agenda - their own reasons for choosing more classes, more and different grades than we had planned; we were fortunate to maintain control of the prompts.

In short, we conducted in effect several system-wide writing assessment projects each with its own grade or set of grades, its choice of modes (ours of prompts), its own holistic scoring and subsequent descriptive analysis, all before we could properly begin our own study. Later, a French-language secondary school asked for assessment of its Grade 9's and 11's in English using the same approach and prompts. This "stopped the show" once more for another two rounds of assessment.

Over the period, then, over 3,600 essays were holistically scored - most at least twice and large "per system" samples put through descriptive analysis - with, per system, a minimum of two reports. And all essays, with scores, returned to students in short order!

The effects on our stages of maturation project were several:

(1) The grades/levels involved extended beyond our original non-adjacent grade 6 - 12 plan to include in some modes 4, 7, 9 and 11. Grade 9 and the relation between performance in Grades 8 and 9 was a special target of interest in two of the systems.

(2) This was a broken front, however, as System A did not want "Point of View", System B did not want Explanatory, System C left choice of mode to the individual teacher ... hence we have strong cross-system samples of writing at some grades/levels,in a particular, one system only at some, and none in some modes for others.

Not inclusive of the French language school (Narrative 9 & 11; Fantasy 9; Point of View 11) here is the participation pattern by system for the three modes under study in this report.

SYSTEM PARTICIPATION

The number in parenthesis indicates the number of systems from which the sample was drawn.

PERS. NARR.	FANTASY	EXPLANATORY
Grade 4 (2)	Grade 4 (1)	
Grade 6 (2)	Grade 6 (2)	Grade 6 (2)
Grade 8 (3)	Grade 8 (2)	Grade 8 (3)
Grade 9 Adv. (2)	Grade 9 Adv. (2)	Grade Adv. (2)
Gen. (1)		Gen. (2)
Basic (1)		Basic
Grade 10 Enr. (1)		Grade 10 Enr. (1)
Adv. (2)		Adv. (1)
Gen. (1)	Grade 10 Gen. (1)	Gen. (1)
	Grade 12 Adv. (1)	Grade 12 Adv. (1)

For Point of View participation in the English-language schools was spottier: one system at 6, 9 General, 10 Gifted, 11 Advanced (and only 7 essays here) and two systems at Grade 8. Consequently, despite the importance of this mode (and a large body of data from NWT Grade 9 and more from our French-language setting) **we have provided a separate and less formal report for descriptive analysis of Point of View**. We regret this as we believe that the mode is very important and we need to know a lot more about what goes on there.

(3) The holistic scoring of the writing occurred "in system"; the essays could not be pulled together for cross-system scoring. It was too vast, essays had to be returned promptly to students, and in-system scorings occurred at different times.

(4) And, because essays had to be returned promptly, we were compelled to "grab" and photocopy per system on their way through a substantial number per grade/level roughly approximating a sample stratified by holistic score as awarded in the system's scoring. That is, we can and do claim that the essays used in the descriptive analysis are representative of the writing, from strong to weak, of the grades/levels from which they were drawn. All the same, the selection of essays tends to be "rough and ready".

For the descriptive analysis, then, we sought a sample of at least 10% of the writing representative of the whole range at the grade/level and across participating systems. Where the original set of essays was small for a particular grade we increased our sample size. Our hearty effort was not flawless from the sampling perspective, but here are the approximate figures: the number of essays written and the approximate percentage used in our descriptive analysis and, for narrative, in the error frequency study:

SAMPLE AS PERCENTAGE OF SET OF AVAILABLE ESSAYS

	NARRATIVE		FANTASY		EXPLANATORY		POINT OF VIEW	
Grade	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
4	321	14	116	22				
6	241	20	159	20	142	28	58	33
8	671	12	205	20	503	13	105	53
9 Adv.	249	12	77	29	222*	11		
9 Gen.	124	26			146	23	22	50
9 Bas.	7	100			10	100		
10 Enr.	28	32			27	44	27	37
10 Adv.	125	27			60	33		
10 Gen.	110	24	43	15	23	52		
11 Adv.							7	100
12 Adv.			29	52	28	21		

* Plus 30 essays from a mixed stream Grade 9 in Toronto, coded on graphs as 9M.

The essays drawn for the fresh and independent descriptive analysis had all grade level and system identification removed, and essays from the various grades and levels were distributed across sets by mode. These were then analyzed by a team of teachers plus myself and the Research Officer. All members of that team but one had been previously involved in the in-system scoring of the writing.

4. THE FINDINGS

In descriptive analysis the emphasis is on positive characterization rather than on deficit.

For many features we want simply to know what choices writers made. For example, was dialogue employed? It is one option in a repertoire of options students might use, might use extensively, and, where used, may be used more or less effectively. The absence of its use in no way implies deficit or fault.

Other features or characteristics of the writing (for that prompt in that mode) may be considered essential or very highly desirable: coherence, focus, in exposition (process/procedure) sequence, etc. and here it is important to determine whether the feature is evident at all and with what degree of effectiveness.

So some features are considered as present/absent (e.g. use of suspense in narrative), others in terms as well as extensiveness of use (humour), and others (focus, coherence) as to quality.

The questions become, then,

- **What do students do when they write? (and tend not to do?)**

- **For particular features, how well?**

- **What relationship, if any, exists between the exhibition of particular features and stages in writing maturation?**

This last question was applied to the writing across grades and levels (Secondary: Enriched (gifted), Advanced (academic), General, Basic) wherever we had a sufficiency of essays in the mode. Here the application of the question becomes

- **Are some features present/effective in a large proportion of essays across most grades/levels?**

- **Do some features appear (and under control) in later grades, but not extensively in early grades?**

PERSONAL NARRATIVE
"Trouble always starts when ... is around."

Please consider here the prompt (direction to concentrate on one principal event) and the categories applied in the descriptive analysis.

Note: A number of comparisons with Fantasy ("Polar Bear in the Shower") are included

DECISIONS:

Choice of Troublemaker:

The general pattern held across all grades and levels. Anywhere from zero to 17% chose author as troublemaker, and between 67 and 90% "another person".

Treatment:

Again there was no evidence of a shift of pattern across grades and streams - the apparently true (with "ordinary" exaggeration) account stood in a ratio of 4, 5, or 6 to 3 to other choices. Very few chose fantasy.

STRUCTURE:

Setting (or "context"):

At least minimal attention to setting was achieved by 77% of Grade 6, 76% of Grade 4, and for the others, over 80%.

A full "Yes": Over 75% - 10E, 10A
Over 60% - 9A, 8
Over 40% (but less than 50%) - 10G, 9G, 6
Over 30% - 9B
Over 20% - 4

Most students from Grade 4 up have awareness of the importance of setting or context, but effectiveness does appear to relate to maturation. There is a clear separation between Grade 8 and Advanced level 9 and 10 on the one hand, and Grades 4, 6 and other levels of secondary on the other.

Sense of an **Ending**:

Yes or "to some extent" for 72% (Grade 4), 68% (Grade 6), and 78% (Grade 10G), with the remainder exceeding 80%.

Again we find awareness of this feature in most writers across all grades studied, the difference lies in effectiveness.

Judged effective (a fitting and clear end point or conclusion):

10E - 78%	9A - 52%	8 - 49%
10A - 48%	9G - 18%	6 - 28%
10G - 45%	9B - 32%	4 - 26%

Observe here both the "flat line" across Grades 8, 9 and 10 Advanced and the quite striking leap from Grades 4 and 6 to Grade 8.

STRATEGIES:

Suspense:

Where some grade/level data were available, we have compared frequency of use of the strategy of Personal Narrative ("Trouble ...") with Fantasy ("Polar Bear in the Shower"):

	Tro.	Pol.		Tro.	Pol.
12A	-	67%	**9B**	44%	-
10E	78%	-	**8**	40%	55%
10A	57%	-	**6**	23%	42%
10G	17%	67%	**4**	17%	23%
9A	46%	64%			
9G	22%	-			

The strategy is more frequently used in "Polar Bear" at all levels. In one mode or the other (or in both) the percentage of students employing the strategy is fairly high (at the least 40%)

except for Grade 4. It would seem to be an "option in hand", then, for substantial numbers of students by **Grade 6**. The figures themselves, especially where "Trouble ..." is considered alone, are doubtless an underestimate of its "availability"; there will certainly have been students who, because of the form their stories took, simply did not draw upon the strategy.

Dialogue: Percentage use (with "Polar bear" comparison)

Here some of our raters were inattentive to the phrase "significant use in story development" and checked dialogue off as a strategy if there was any dialogue at all. Hence the figures are somewhat inflated.

	TR.	POL.		TR.	POL.
12A	-	33%	**9B**	6%	-
10E	33%	-	**8**	40%	50%
10A	25%	-	**6**	14%	61%
10G	13%	33%	**4**	15%	46%
9A	26%	50%			
9G	10%	-			

Again we find a much higher frequency of use for fantasy, indicative that it is an available strategy for many students as early as **Grade 4**.

In recording for "Trouble" raters were asked to judge the management of the mechanics of dialogue. So few at many grades employed it in this mode, however, that a report here would not be helpful.

Humour:

For personal narrative use of humour as a strategy was surprisingly infrequent. Except for 10 Enriched (56%), in no grade/level did humour appear in more than 40% of the stories; in 9 General and Basic, less than 20%.

12% of Grade 8's employed humour as a principal feature; in no other group did it reach 10%.

By contrast, some use of humour was found in the following percentages "Polar Bear" stories:

12A - 80%	**8** - 58%
10G - 50%	**6** - 48%
9A - 55%	**4** - 37%

Because of the paucity of humour in "Trouble ..." it is difficult to report much of value on judged quality/effectiveness of humour. On a scale of 0 - 3 the mean for 10A was **2.0**; Grade 8, **1.9**; Grade 6, **1.7**. For Polar Bear Grade 4 averaged **2.0** and both 6 and 8, **1.9**.

Summary of Choice: "Trouble ..." and "Polar Bear ..."

The following table summarizes the use of the strategies of suspense, dialogue and humour across modes. Evidently choice is strongly influenced by the mode and the prompt.

SUMMARY OF CHOICES
PERCENTAGE USE: NARRATIVE (TR) and FANTASY (PB)

GRADE	SUSPENSE		DIALOGUE		HUMOUR	
	TR	PB	TR	PB	TR	PB
12A	-	67	-	33	-	80
10E	78	-	33	-	55	-
10A	57	-	25	-	37	-
10G	17	67	13	33	13	50
9A	46	64	26	50	28	55
9G	22	-	10	-	15	-
9B	44	-	6	-	18	-
8	40	55	44	50	44	58
6	23	42	14	61	31	47
4	17	23	15	46	26	38

SCALED FEATURES: FOCUS, AWARENESS OF READER, PERSONALITY OF THE WRITER

These were the main features in other modes for Personal Narrative where a 0 - 3 scale was employed. A zero in general means a feature is wholly lacking.

Here and for the scaled features please consult the graphs that conclude this report. There the data are reported in two ways: the mean score on a 0 - 3 scale where one obtains a sense of the pattern of change across grades and levels and then as the percentage obtaining **either a 0 or 1 on the feature**: a way of saying that such and such a percentage of the essays reveal no evidence or very little of the feature.

For example: For **focus** in narrative, 10 General averages about 1.5 on the 0 - 3 scale though only about 26% received a 0 or 1; about three-quarters exhibited some degree of success.

Four points stand out at once as we examine these features together:

(1) **Awareness of Reader** and **Personality of the Writer** are very strongly associated - almost two sides of the same coin, or overlapping strategies contributing to both effects.

(2) These same two features are much less frequently present and effective for most grades and levels than is **focus**, with **Awareness of Reader** especially lacking in General and Basic Level writing.

(3) The gain with respect to these is very pronounced from Grade 6 to Grade 8. (Clearly a maturation gain of some importance - not later reflected in General and Basic.)

(4) If we take the three features together, Grade 8 performance seems quite as strong as Grade 9 Advanced (and note that Grade 8 contains the "General" and "Basic" writers of the future).

This last point is worthy of remark. It is not a "blip" or set of blips, for we have other evidence. A very large number of the Grade 8 and 9 essays came from a system in which all Grade 8's and all second semester 9's wrote. Further Grade 8 and 9 were scored there together by the same teachers with grade and student identification masked. What the teachers found, somewhat to their dismay when holistic scores were compared, was that average performance at Grade 8 was equal to Grade 9 Advanced.

Data from our descriptive analysis as well as from holistic scoring all tend to the same conclusion:

Given that potential "General" and "Basic" level writers are part of the grade 8 class, we must assume some decline in average performance in writing in Grade 9, with some "retrieval" in Grade 10. Further virtually all graphs show striking differences between Advanced and General level writers: streaming (precisely that which the Ministry of Education proposes now to discontinue at Grade 9 at least) "works" as a separator of writers from non-writers.

Returning to the three features:

Those strategies that show the writer's sensitivity to his/her reader and which effectively reveal the writer's personality reflect, on the whole, the more mature writer, but the techniques are quite significantly widespread by Grade 8. Gains from that point, excepting our small group of 10 Enriched, are not striking. (It is unfortunate that we did not have Grade 12 students writing in this mode.)

Focus, the ability to centre our attention on the troublemaker around one principal event, was usually a very important contributor to a story's success. Unlike the previous features, it is already strongly in evidence in Grade 4 and increases strongly especially between Grades 6 and 8 to the point, one might well argue, that it may be perceived as a reasonable expectation for Grade 8. We observe slight decline in 9 Advanced and partial recovery in 10 Advanced. All grades and levels, however, do perform modestly well here.

FANTASY: POLAR BEAR IN THE SHOWER

CHOICES OF STRATEGIES: SUSPENSE, HUMOUR, DIALOGUE

Notes have already been made, with tables, to compare fantasy with personal narrative with respect to use of humour, dialogue, and suspense - almost all considerably more in evidence in fantasy at the grades and levels compared.

One point of importance is brought out here: it is unwise and unwarranted to assume from a study of performance in only one writing mode that the repertoire of strategies revealed there is a fair reflection of their availability to students.

One further point may be mode concerning humour which was much more extensively used in this mode. One the 0 - 3 scale, the average performance for those who in fact employed humour was as follows:

Grade	12A - 2.3	8 - 1.9
	10G - 2.0	6 - 1.9
	9A - 2.3	4 - 2.0

That is to say: on the whole, whatever the grade or level students who chose humour tended in this mode, to be at least moderately effective, and many revealed excellence.

SETTING and "CHOICE OF WORLD"

Two other features were of a check-off variety: **Setting** and **"Choice of World"**.

80% or more of all writers whatever the grade and level provided at least minimal **setting** or **context**. The percentages receiving an unqualified "YES" (= at least adequate) were as follows:

12A - 87%	8 - 67%
10G - 65%	6 - 46%
9A - 68%	4 - 42%

As with personal narrative, we find a major gain for this feature between Grades 6 and 8, and the "flattening" between Grade 8 and Grade 9 Advanced.

Choice of world is especially important in fantasy. The student has been invited to enter a "world" where polar bears can, if rarely, be found taking a bathroom shower and where the writer and the bear can engage each other.

Some students ducked the challenge and treated the bear as object rather than as a personality: the bear had escaped from the zoo, it was dangerous, it had to be shot or returned to the zoo - so the bear was just a bear, little or no "magic" and not "engage-able". Some got trapped between worlds, so that one find elements of the magical but the fantasy world is not sustained. Others entered an imaginary world where bears could talk, take showers, etc. and sustained it. This is what is meant by our categories under "World".

For those who entered an imaginary world, how did they "exit"? How did they end the story? Some sustained the magic to the end: we are, having entered the writer's imaginary world, left "wondering" - did it maybe happen? Others relied on the "only a dream" escape, returning us wholly to the real world. And some endings were simply not effective either in sustaining or exiting.

The pattern in response to these questions (a graph for "Choice of World" is appended) is fascinating. The "no world established" group is small in all grades (none at Grade 12, top of 14% in 10G). For the real world/imaginary world observe (as per cent).

CHOICE OF WORLD

Grade	N	Imaginary	Real	None
12A	15	47	53	0
10G	14	7	79	14
9A	22	36	59	5
8	39	44	54	3
6	32	59	28	13
4	26	35	58	8

When one attempts to tease out a maturation pattern (on the assumption that the better response is the creation of an imaginary world), the figures here seem to suggest that maturation defined as creation and maintenance of a hypothetical world reaches in apogee in Grade 6, falling away after that point! Though the "N" is small, it appears certain that students in 10G, not on the whole enjoying a successful academic career, have much trouble entering into the spirit, as it were.

I cannot account for the trend, but only hypothesize: Do we in schools tend to drive the imaginative, the magical world out as we push students up the grades to more and more serious education? Is this a part of "growing up" - the Dylan Thomas world of "once below a time" displaced by seriousness? Is our society's interest in violence at work - variations on shoot or "terminate" the damn' bear? It would be interesting at the classroom level, especially above Grade 6, to pursue the question and to encourage exploration into imaginary realms.

Given the size of our sample and the percentage choosing an imaginary world, observations on the endings of the stories (the "exit") must be quite limited. Here is how those who elected the imaginary ended their stories:

FORM OF EXIT

GRADE	N	"WONDERING"	"ONLY A DREAM"	INEFFECTIVE
12A	5	2	1	2
10G	3	2	1	0
9A	9	4	2	3
8	24	9	5	10
6	17	5	5	7
4	10	3	0	7

Though, in the interest of brevity I have not included samples of writing in the report, perhaps one example here will be helpful - from a Grade 6 student in the Northwest Territories from a small Mackenzie Valley community where bears are a part of real life. Note how delicately the writer balances the real world where bears are killed and the imaginative world, and even provides the rationale for the mix-up:

VERONICA

I had to go to the bathroom really bad. I opened the bathroom door and was utterly shocked when I saw a humongous polar bear in my bathtub. It growled at me. It made my skin crawl.

"What are you doing in my bathroom?" the polar bear asked.

"I live here," I replied. The polar bear looked at me for a long time, then started to talk.

"My name is Veronica. I guess you are my roommate. The immigration bears told me I would have a roommate, but I didn't expect a funny-looking thing like yourself. I am from the North Pole. It's a rule there that a polar bear over twenty has to move away from the North Pole. I didn't know where to go, so I went to some immigration people and they told me to go here. Now, go look around for a bottle of nail polish so I can paint my claws," she said.

I went into my bedroom and got her a bottle of nail polish. I opened the bathroom door and realized Veronica was not in the bathtub. "I'm in the livingroom!" Veronica yelled. So I went into the livingroom and handed her the bottle of nail polish. She was watching T.V. She took the lid off the nail polish bottle and began to paint her claws.

"You can't stay here," I said, looking as sympathetic as I could.

"Why not?" she said curiously. I hated to tell her that she could not stay, but I had to.

"You can't stay because Fort Good Hope just has humans and cats and dogs. You are the only polar bear in town. If you go outside, you might get shot," I answered.

"But my immigration card that the immigration people gave me in case I got lost says Fort Good Hope," she argued. I looked at it. It said forty miles east of Fort Good Hope on a reserve for polar bears. I told her this, she said she was sorry. She said good-bye and thanked me for being so kind. I could feel my face getting red, so I said good-bye, too. Then she left.

I went and sat on the couch in the livingroom and gave my head a shake. Then I could not figure out if I was only dreaming or if that all really happened!

THE FEATURES ON THE 0 - 3 SCALE:

All other features in the descriptive analysis of fantasy were judged on a 0 - 3 scale - a "zero" indicating virtual absence and a "one" meaning generally ineffectual. As with the Personal Narrative features, the graphs appended to the report provide the mean scores by grade and the percentages obtaining a 0 or 1. Please refer to those in context of the following.

AWARENESS OF READER, PERSONALITY OF THE WRITER, ENGAGEMENT:

At some grades the association of these features is very strong, as it was throughout for personal narrative. However, at Grade 8 and especially Grade 9 and 12 Advanced, "writer's personality" emerges very strikingly - almost all students in these latter two groups scoring at a 2 or a 3, while the gain in reader awareness is much more modest.

Where there is genuine engagement with the bear (rather than the bear as mere object), the writer as one of the two principal actors in the story is almost certainly going to reveal his/her personality, so there is inevitably "interference" here, of a positive sort, with "engagement".

On these features as well as "engagement" we do observe a fairly striking gain from Grade 8 to Grade 9 (most definitely not characteristic of most features for personal narrative). No gain between 9 Advanced and 12 Advanced emerges, however, for engagement.

ENGAGEMENT and CHARACTERIZATION:

The "cluster" effect for **Engagement** and the very thin picture for **Characterization** is partly the result of the writer's initial "treatment" decision: whether to enter into the fantasy world where polar bears really can appear in people's bathrooms, have a little chat, reveal a personality, etc. When students chose a "real world" instead in which polar bears appear in bathrooms only after an escape from a zoo and have to be recaptured or shot [the bear is an <u>object</u> for removal, an impediment to home life] or failed to establish and sustain a "world" at all, the writing isn't likely to feature "engagement", "characterization" of the bear, or perhaps even reveal much of the writer's personality.

Characterization of the bear (obviously influenced by the "choice of world") presents a flat and undistinguished picture across grades and levels. There is gain on this factor as one proceeds through the grades, but the countervailing choice (fewer students above Grade 6 choosing the fantasy world where the bear would be given "character") probably undermines the picture: the story is likely that senior writers are considerably more effective in character creation/development, but in this mode fewer chose the route in story development that would have revealed that ability.

CONSISTENCY and PLOT:

Students' ability at least to sustain the world chosen is high in all grades: a score of 2 or 3 was obtained by more than 60% of Grade 4, 70% of Grade 6, and over 80% for all other groups.

However, for **"Plot"** (coherence, working through to a satisfactory conclusion - somewhat similar to **Focus** in Personal Narrative), the gain between Grades 4 and 6 is quite striking - evidently a stage of writing maturation is moved through here with improvement in the ability to manage various elements of the story.

It should also be noted that on these two features Grade 10 General students succeed very well - in the same range as 9 and 12 Advanced.

CONCLUSION:

It is much more difficult for fantasy to claim "stages" in writing maturation than it was for narrative. The reason for the problem appears to lie with the initial choice of worlds. Where students choose the "real world", characterization of the bear will be minimal as will engagement. Consequently, though the ability to characterize may increase through the grades that increase is hidden by the compounding factor of choice: fewer above Grade 6 chose the imaginary world.

It seems on our evidence that a kind of "maturation reversal" emerges between Grades 6 and 8: few students willing to risk the imaginative (fantastical) enterprise. The "neat" task for the writing program would be to encourage "reversal" of the reversal! And that is what the units we have prepared in this mode seek to do.

EXPLANATORY WRITING

The specific prompt employed in this project was **"How to Shop for a ..."**. In the writing unit series we have prepared, we have illustrated a less specific variation: **"How to Make/Do ..."** again wherein the student is writing as expert to novice. Both were employed successfully in the Northwest Territories assessment at Grade 9, and the descriptive analysis chart applies almost equally well to both.

"How to Shop ..." is of course quite limited and limiting and we do encourage the looser prompt. Both are provided with notes in the writing unit series.

In the current project, two problems emerged: In some classes students seem to have been encouraged by the teacher (not the prompt) to write a story about a shopping trip. Across a number of classes other students elected (or may have been encouraged to) write about shopping skills in general. Hence in the former it was usually difficult to discern much in the way of advice or strategies (expert to novice); in the latter the advice and strategies tended to be rather obvious (shop around, compare prices, know your size ...). Writing, consequently tended to be both dull and unrevealing of the writer as expert. In short, some unfortunate choices were made or encouraged, militating for those writers against opportunity to come across with any panache, to provide specific "how to" information, to reveal a personality enthusiastic, engaging or expert.

We had, then, some disappointments and these rather inappropriate responses to the prompt undermine to some degree the search for patterns of maturation.

CHOICES:

At all grades and levels over half the students chose the wholly expository (explanatory) mode. There was variation by grade/level but not in association with maturation. (The matter of seemingly directed choice noted above appears to have been a factor, unfortunately.) Figures vary from a low of 54% at Grade 8 to a high of 83% for 10 Enriched - the average being around 75%.

Substantial numbers chose a mix, quite appropriate, of explanation with personal narrative illustration subordinated to the explanatory/illustrative purpose: as high as 30% (10A) and 21% (8) and 23% (6) - the others less than 15%.

Choice of a wholly narrative mode, with the distinction between those where the narrative served to illustrate or feature good shopping strategies and those where purpose became wholly lost in a story about a shopping trip:

NARRATIVE (as %)

	12A	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	9M*	8	6
Relevant	-	17	5	8	5	3	-	8	13	5
Irrelevant	17	-	-	17	5	3	20	3	11	13

* 9M is the mixed Grade 9 Toronto group.
(For 12A we have only 6 essays)

One may see here where a number of students, in employing a wholly narrative approach, headed off in the wrong direction.

There was some variation across groups in the apparent purpose: to explain, to entertain, or to entertain while explaining:

PURPOSE (as %)

	12A	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	9M	8	6
Explain	17	75	90	92	55	86	80	78	52	65
Both	50	25	5	-	40	6	-	6	26	18
Entertain	30	-	-	-	-	3	10	11	13	5
Lacks purpose	-	-	5	8	5	6	10	6	10	13

Some association with maturation or, at least, with security or comfort in writing may be seen in that General and Basic level students at secondary tend to stick rather strictly to the purely explanatory.

FEATURES ON THE 0 - 3 SCALE:

Effectiveness of **Introduction** or contextualization was not in the set of descriptive analysis categories, but we felt we were missing a feature of some importance. Hence the Research Officer and I added it and went back through the set to judge that feature.

Reporting here is again chiefly through the appended graphs which appear in two forms: the average score on the 0 - 3 scale and the percentage obtaining a 0 or 1 (effective absence) on the 0 - 3 scale.

Please note again that **9M** is the de-streamed Grade 9 from Toronto.

INTRODUCTION:

The lack of any engaging introduction was characteristic of much of the writing. Less than 50% of the essays in all grades excepting 12A, 10E, and 10A received a rating of 2 or 3: for 10G, 9M, 9B and Grade 6 - less than 30%.

Students tended simply to identify the topic and walk right into the steps (or the story) without engaging the reader's interest in any way or establishing the writer's credentials or interests.

COHERENCE:

All groups, Grades 6 - 12, contained a majority of essays that obtained a 2 or a 3: over 80% for 12A, 10E, 10A, 9A, 9G and 9M. Fundamentally they stayed on topic if not wholly on target, and there is little to note here about "stages" of maturation. Rather, the evidence suggests that by Grade 6 most students are capable of writing a coherent explanation.

SEQUENCE:

The ability to set out the explanation in an appropriately ordered manner (topically or by steps) is usually essential to explanation: the novice must be able to follow the steps in sequence. Excepting 9B and 10G, over half the essays in each grade/level received either a 2 or 3 here. However only 12A, 10E, and 10A exceeded 70%.

We do not find any significant gain from Grade 6 to 8 or any change between Grade 8 and 9 Advanced.

INFORMATION:

When the writer as expert is describing a process for the presumed novice, sufficiency of information is also important. The pattern for this feature is rather similar to that for **Sequence**.

Over 80% of the essays from 12A, 10E, and 10A were rated at a 2 or a 3 on this feature. 10G, 9B, 9M, and Grade 6: less than 50% received a 2 or a 3, but in all but 9B more than 40% obtained a 2 or a 3.

Performance on the whole then was a little thinner than that for **Sequence**. However, there was a striking gain between Grade 8 (at exactly 50% with a 2 or 3) and 9 Advanced (above 70%).

AWARENESS OF READER and PERSONALITY OF THE WRITER:

As in the other modes reported upon, these features were strongly associated: for 12A, 10E, 10A, and 9A over 80% were judged at a 2 or a 3. For Personality of the Writer, figures were over 90% for these grades and levels!

For both we find a considerable gap, more pronounced for the second feature, between these academic groups and all the other grades, and not a great deal of difference between grades 6 and 8.

For writing of this kind the expertise and enthusiasm of the writer needs to come through as does his/her sense of the reader's needs. The reader, further needs encouragement rather than intimidation.

Strategies that reveal the writer's personality and that take the reader into account seem well developed in most academic stream writers above Grade 8, and it would seem salutary to give greater emphasis to them in Grades 6 and 8. A good many students there have the knack, so such strategies ought to be "in range" of most.

CONCLUSION:

Stages of maturation do not seem as pronounced in this mode as they did for narrative. Most aspects of the task seem well within the ability of many writers by Grade 6; the challenge is largely to encourage more students at Grades 6 - 8 to employ those strategies that would improve their writing along these dimensions.

For all grades and levels the thinnest feature seems to be adequacy of the introduction, though we do find improvement in Grade 10 Advanced over Grade 9 Advanced.

6. OUTCOMES - THE UNITS: UNITS FOR THE WRITING PROGRAM

Our first intent in this project was to describe stages of writing maturation across grade levels. Our second was to develop supplementary units for the writing program responsive to the stages discerned.

This we have done in response to the performance in three modes as described in the present report, plus "Point of View" for which performance has been described separately and less formally.

Additionally, in response to patterns of error frequency discerned (narrative, Grades 4 - 10), we have developed unit series for **The Sentence**, **Grammar - the Verb**, and **Spelling**, each for occasional use across those grades for students in need of a boost.

Unit series developed in response to the descriptive analysis are set out for "lower" and "higher" grades as follow with deliberate grade overlap:

Personal Narrative: Grades 4 - 7 series and Grades 7 - 10 series
Fantasy: Grades 4 - 7 series and Grades 7 - 12 series
Explanatory and **Point of View:** Grades 6 - 9 and Grades 9 - 12 series

The series for **Personal Narrative**, as an example, includes unit sequences on **Paragraphing and Organization**, **Focus**, **Strategies for Story Development** (specifically **context**, **effective endings**, **suspense**), and **Sense of a Reader - Personality of the Writer**.

It begins, as does each of the other unit series, with highlights from the descriptive analysis (or, for the "mechanics" units, the error frequency study), so that teachers will have a good idea of reasonable expectations. Illustrative essays or parts of essays are all from student writing - chiefly within the project, with occasional illustration from NWT writing at Grade 6 or 9 or the writing from the French-language secondary school students.

7. APPENDICES

The topics, the record sheets for descriptive analysis, and the graphs of performance follow. The graphs should be consulted in association with the description of the findings in the report.

Peter Evans
June 1992

PROMPTS AND ORIGINAL DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS FORMS

Essay Prompts

Point of View
(an issue of concern)

In this composition you are to develop your point of view about a topic of concern to you as a young person. The choice of topic is up to you.
It should be an issue that interests you and that you know something about: it may be an issue or problem quite personal to you or other young people, or an issue or problem of more general concern within the school or community. (Don't tackle a vast subject, such as acid rain, global disarmament, or things like that.)

Explain the problem or issue, providing some illustration and drawing, if possible, on personal experience. Suggest some means of improving the situation.

(If you choose to write about a highly personal matter, only your teacher will be able to identify you. Others reading your writing will not be able to identify you or your school.)

To the teacher: As stimulus you may suggest a number of possibilities: community concerns, drugs, an issue local to the school, but don't be directive. Assure them they are exploring an issue, and that they do not have to come down on one side or the other.

"Trouble always starts when ...is around"

Explanation of the topic:

Write a story about a personal experience, something that happened to you because of a person who, for some reason or other, always brings trouble with him/her. That person could be a friend, a classroom pest, an older or younger brother or sister, or it could be you: "Trouble always starts when I am around."

In your story reveal the character of the person and describe the particular occasion when that person caused trouble. describe the effects of the trouble s/he caused. Humour is most welcome, and your own character should come through, too. The story may really have happened, or it may be partly or wholly imaginary, but make it seem real.

To the teacher: Encourage students in their planning to concentrate on a particular occasion, and not just string out a number of occasions. It is quite appropriate, however, in establishing the character as "always" a troublemaker, to introduce the main event with brief recall of other occasions and some characterization.

Explanation

How to shop for a ...

If a buyer went to the first used car lot he saw, walked in, and, after receiving a brief sales pitch, bought the first car the salesperson pushed at him, we would think the buyer was pretty foolish. And so would the salesperson.

Though you probably haven't bought a car lately, you likely know quite a bit about how to shop carefully for something: perhaps a bicycle, a motorbike, clothes, a clock radio, a Walkman, or skis. Even if you aren't an expert on a particular product, you can suggest some rules for careful shopping.

Imagine, then, that you have a friend who doesn't know very much about a particular product or about good shopping habits. You do, and you want to help him/her to shop wisely. Write a composition explaining what to look for in the product and how to go about shopping for it.

Your composition should be informal in style. A funny incident from personal experience might be a valuable way to illustrate your point in an interesting way.

To the teacher: Do encourage specificity. Remind the student s/he is the expert and that evidence of the writer's character and enthusiasm make for interesting reading.

FANTASY

POLAR BEAR IN THE SHOWER

Imagine that you have just come into your bathroom and discovered a polar bear taking a shower (or a bath).

Write a story telling what happens next. Begin at the point where you discover the bear.

(Sketch courtesy of
Department of Education,
Province of New Brunswick).

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Narrative: **"TROUBLE ALWAYS STARTS.."**

CHOICES (Circle choice)

Troublemaker: – self – other person – animal or pet – none established

Narrator: The story is narrated in the first person: – Yes – No – Partially

Fiction/Fantasy: (circle choice)

– wholly fantasy – wholly fictional – true, but exaggerated – apparently true

STRUCTURE

Setting: The writer provides a setting/context to orientate the reader. (circle choice)

– Yes – Minimal – No

Focus:

– The writer focuses and elaborates principal event	3
– The writer focuses on an event but gives insufficient detail	2
– The writer gives a string of events	1
– The writer does not focus on any pertinent event	0

Ending: The writer supplies a satisfactory ending. (circle choice)

– Yes – To some extent – No

STRATEGIES OF WRITING

Humour: (circle choice)

– not used – touches of humour
– an important feature – considerable use

If humour is employed it is:

– imaginatively employed with appropriate constraint	3
– fairly effective	2
– too forced, exaggerated	1
– ineffective	0

Suspense: The writer introduces an element of suspense in the story. Y N

Dialogue: Dialogue has significant use in story development. Y N

If dialogue is used the writer:
- shows reasonable mastery of conventions 3
- uses conventions reasonably consistently 2
- uses some signals, but inconsistently 1
- shows no understanding of the conventions 0

Characterization of troublemaker:

- engaging, detailed 3
- clear, some illustration 2
- minimal 1
- no characterization 0

READER/WRITER

Awareness of reader:

- the writer depicts events clearly, is engaging and evokes empathy in the reader 3
- the writer shows some awareness of the reader 2
- the reader receives little attention from the writer 1
- the writer is oblivious of the reader 0

Personality of the writer:

- the writer's personality comes through clearly 3
- the reader can partially detect the writer's personality 2
- a few glimpses of the writer can be seen 1
- there is little hint of the writer's personality 0

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Informative. "HOW TO SHOP..."

CHOICES (circle your choice)

Purpose:

•explain entertain •both •lacks purpose

Treatment:

•chiefly expository •mixture of exposition and narrative

•chiefly narrative, but relevant •wholly narrative and irrelevant

STRUCTURE

Sequence:

•there is a sequence of clearly defined steps in a logical order	3
•most steps evident but not clearly signalled	2
•an attempt to give steps, but sequence not clear	1
•little evidence of steps	0

Information:

•the writer includes all pertinent information	3
•some information lacks details	2
•much information is incomplete	1
•the information is insufficient to be of any use	0

Coherence:

•the writer remains on topic, and does not digress	3
•the writer adds some irrelevancies, but on the whole, subordinates to task	2
•many irrelevant facts distract the reader	1
•much irrelevant material leads to incoherence	0

READER/WRITER

Awareness of reader (as a non-specialist):

(the writer is aware of possible problems the reader may have and takes care to inform, advise, remind and warn the reader of things to do (or not do); as well, s/he may offer encouragement.)

GOAL: WELL-ACHIEVED PARTIALLY LIMITED ACHIEVEMENT NONE

Personality of the writer:

•the writer's personality comes through as confident, enthusiastic and engaging	3
•the reader can detect the writer's personality	2
•few glimpses of the writer can be seen	1
•there is no sign of the writer's personality	0

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Fantasy. "POLAR BEAR..."

CHOICES (circle appropriate phrase)

"World"

- the writer enters an imaginary world
- the writer treats the bear as an object in the "real" world
- no "world" is established

Exit from imaginary world, (where applicable)

- only a "dream"
- leaves us wondering
- ineffective

STRUCTURE

Setting: The writer provides a setting/context to orientate the reader Yes Minimal N

Consistency: (whichever the choice of world, imaginary or real)

- imaginatively sustained 3
- largely sustained, with few inconsistencies 2
- partly sustained, but with many inconsistencies 1
- confused 0

Plot:

- story is a coherent whole 3
- story worked through to a satisfactory conclusion 2
- some signs of a plot, but inconclusive or inconsistent 1
- little sense of plot 0

USE OF STRATEGIES

Use of Humour: (circle choice)

- employed throughout
- considerable use
- touches of humour
- not used

If Humour is employed it is:

- imaginatively employed with appropriate constraint 3
- fairly effective 2
- too forced, exaggerated 1
- ineffective 0

Suspense: the writer uses an element of suspense in the story Y N

Character creation:

- effective characterization of bear, narrator and others (if applicable) 3
- good characterization of bear and narrator 2
- some characterization of bear or narrator 1
- little characterization of bear or narrator 0

Engagement (narrator and bear)

- imaginatively sustained 3
- consistently sustained 2
- some, but not well sustained 1
- none 0

Is dialogue used to sustain the engagement? Y N

Other features noted:

READER/WRITER

Sense of reader:

- satisfactory involvement with the reader 3
- occasional attempts to involve the reader 2
- some slight indication 1
- no indication 0

Personality of the writer:

- the writer reveals himself engagingly and is responsive to the events 3
- the writer reveals his character 2
- a few hints 1
- little sign 0

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Expository. **"Point of View--An Issue of Concern"**

1. Issue of concern selected:

2. Which of the following best describe the composition: (circle choice)

•General •General but specific aspects addressed

•Limited and specific •A string of loosely related concerns

3. Statement of Problem(s) or Issue(s)

Never explicit or focused	0
"Woolly"	1
Clearly implicit (engaged)	2
Clear explicit statement	3

4. Choice of Treatment: (circle choice)

•wholly expository •Expository with narrative component

•Chiefly narrative but relevant •Chiefly narrative and irrelevant

Elaboration, Argument:

Evidence:

Mostly opinion or general statement without support	0
Support, but general or superficial	1
Some illustration in support	2
Most points well supported	3

Quality of reasoning:

Nil	0
Mostly opinion	1
Some logical foundation	2
Strongly reasoned	3

Balance:

Entirely one-sided	0
Acknowledgement of other perspective	1
Consideration of more that one perspective	2
Balanced presentation of issue	3

Conclusions:

Lacking	0
Inadequate, unsupported	1
Generally sound	2
Sound and reasonably detailed	3

Author's confidence, competence, reasoning

Knowledgeability:

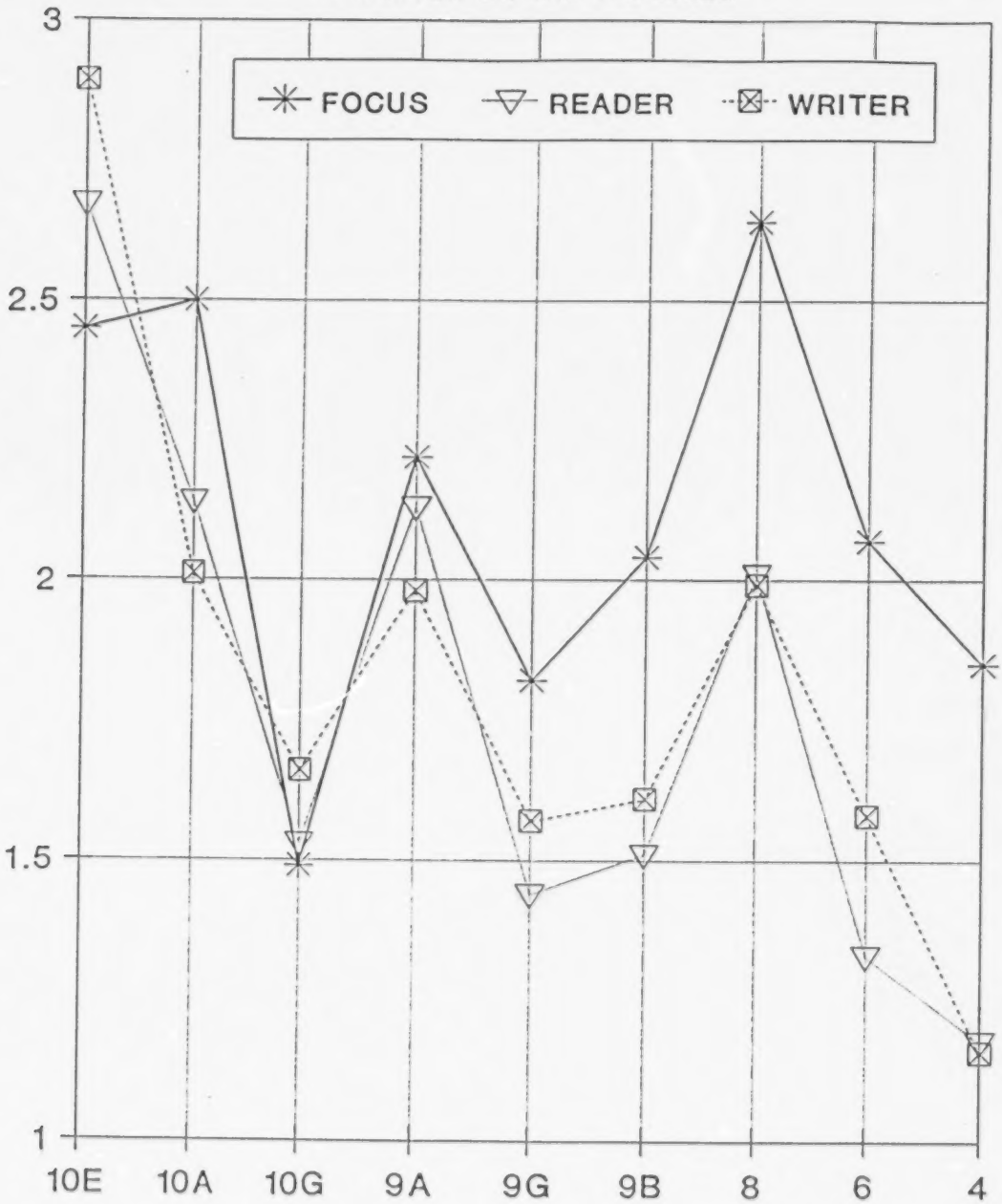
No evidence of grasp of the issue	0
Limited or partial understanding	1
Good sense of the issue and its scope	2
Precise understanding of the issue and its scope	3

Investment:

Little evidence of commitment or interest	0
Strong viewpoint but little else	1
Firm viewpoint, well substantiated	2, 3

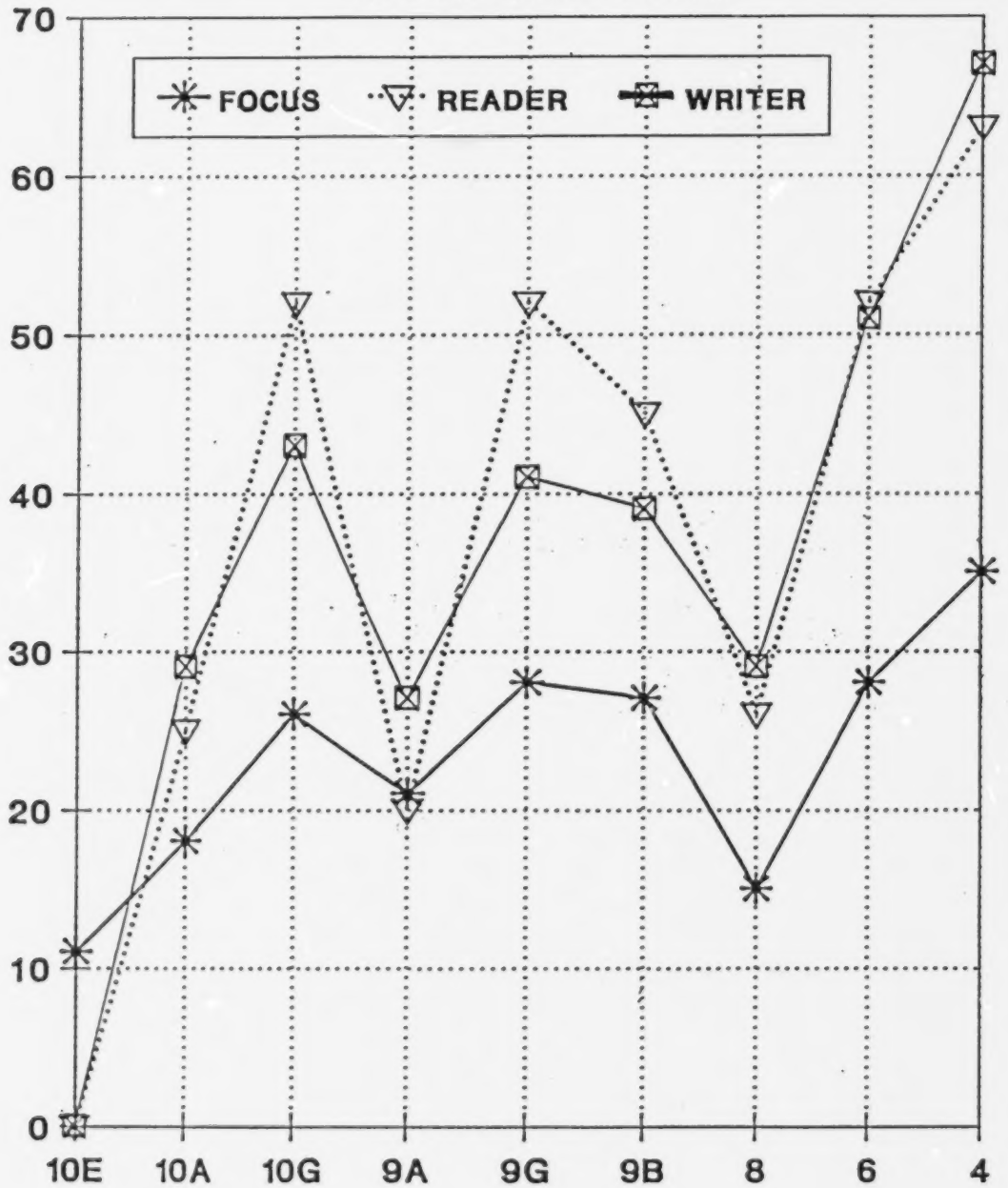
TROUBLE

MEANS FOR FOCUS, AWARENESS OF READER, PERSONALITY OF WRITER ON THE 0-3 SCALE



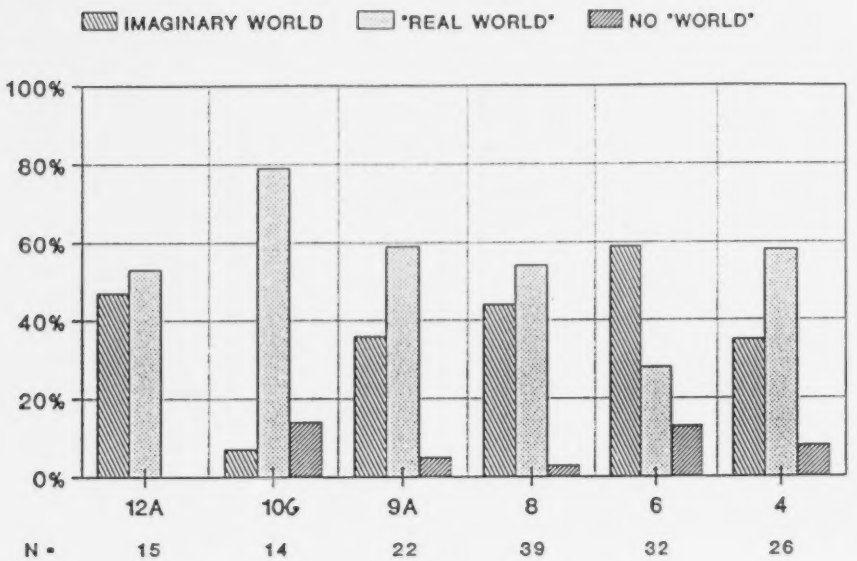
TROUBLE

PERCENTAGE SCORING EITHER A ZERO (NOT EVIDENT)
OR A ONE (VERY LIMITED):



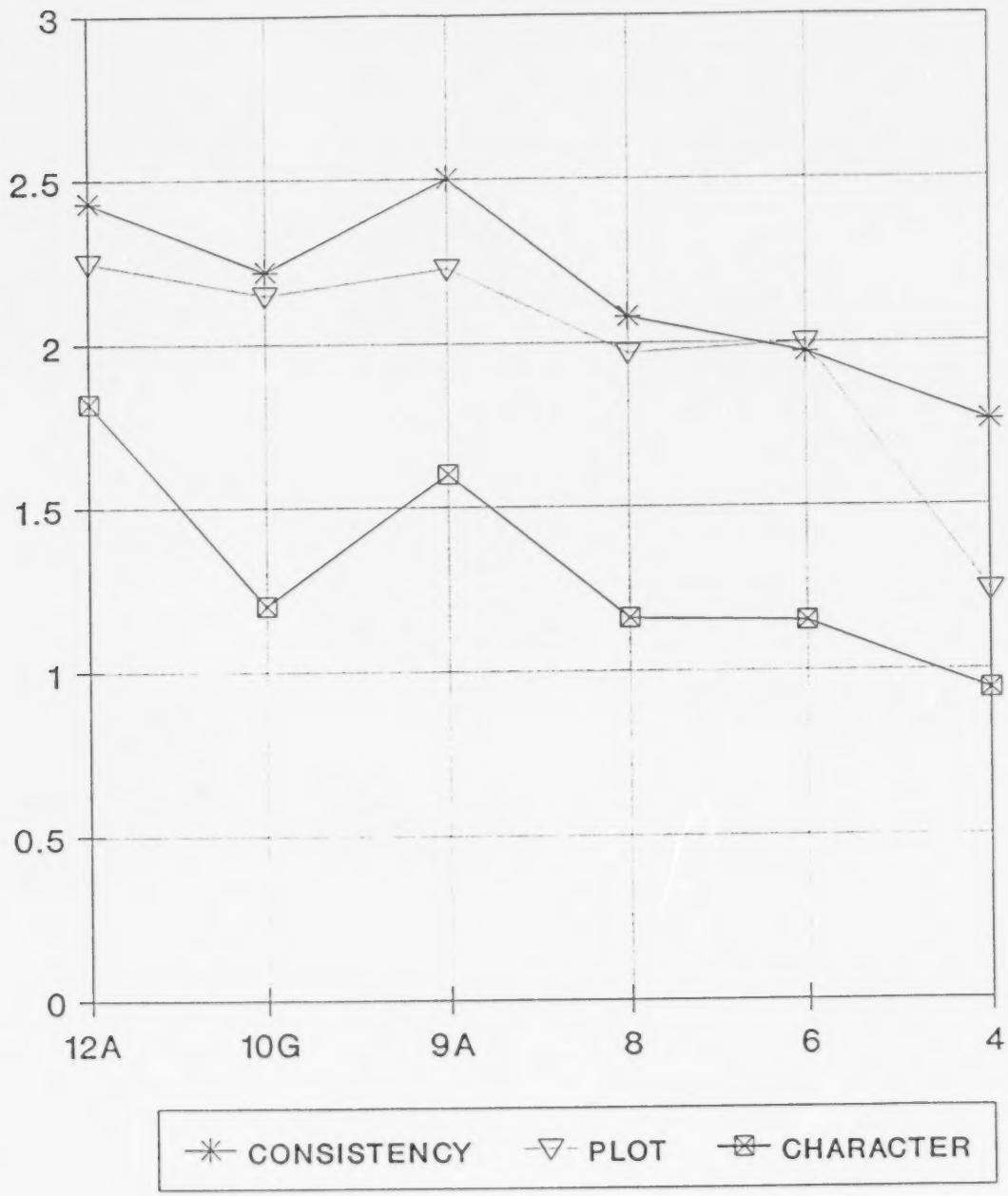
POLAR BEAR

CHOICE OF WORLD



POLAR

MEANS FOR CONSISTENCY, PLOT, AND CHARACTER CREATION
(SCALE 0-3)



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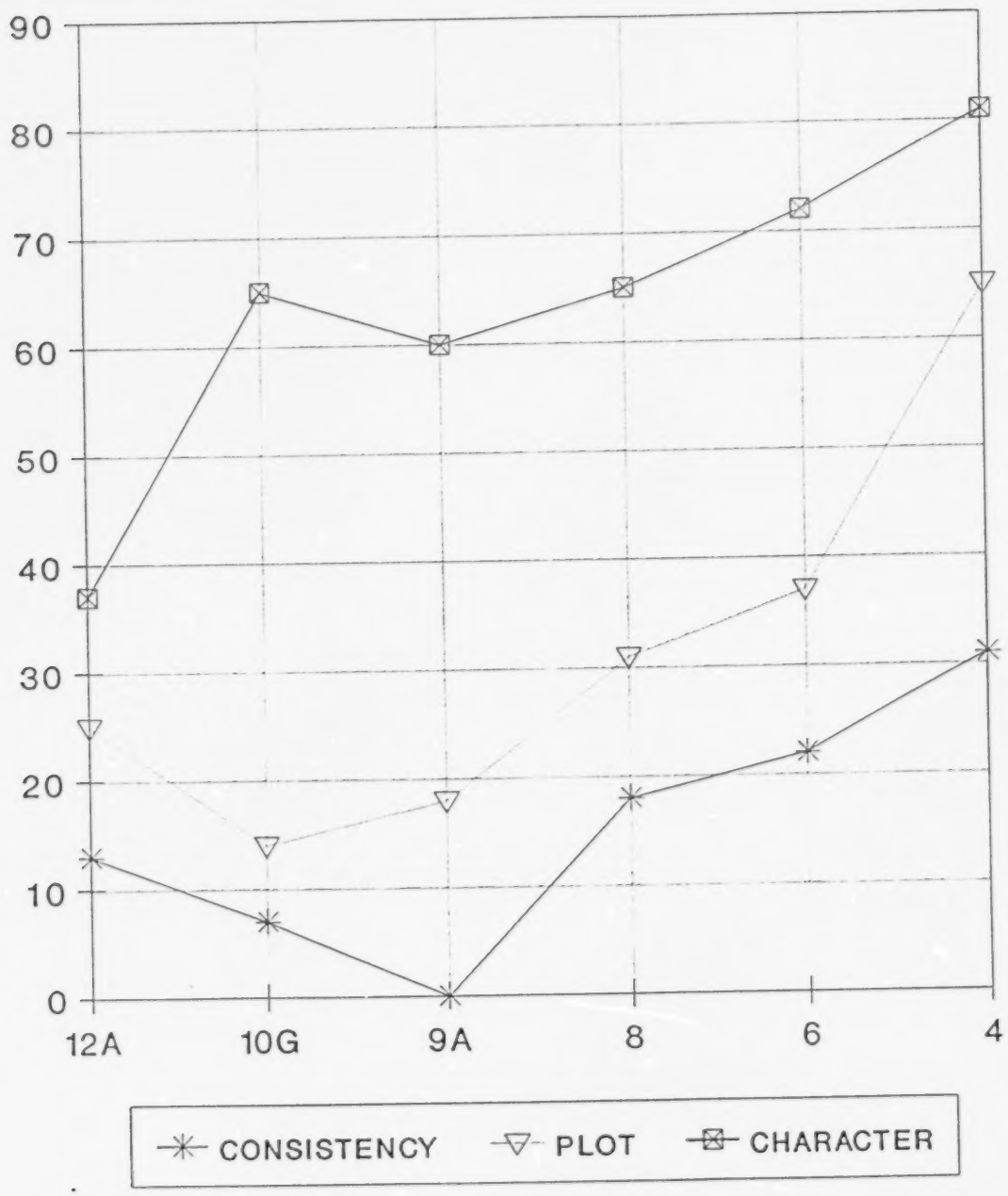
PERCENTAGE SCORING EITHER A ZERO (NOT EVIDENT) OR A ONE:



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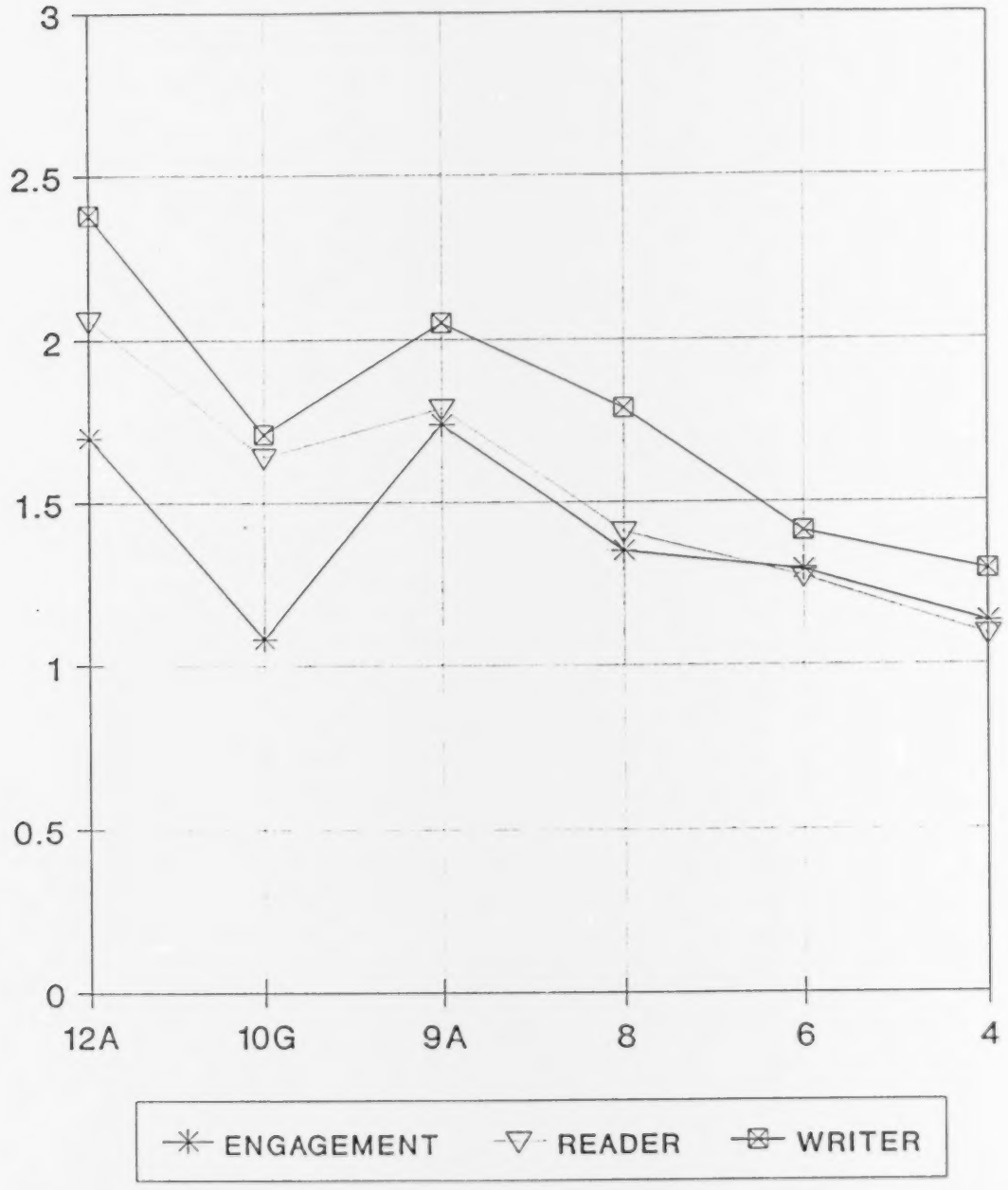
MEANS FOR ENGAGEMENT (with Bear), SENSE OF READER, PERSONALITY OF WRITER (Scale 0-3)



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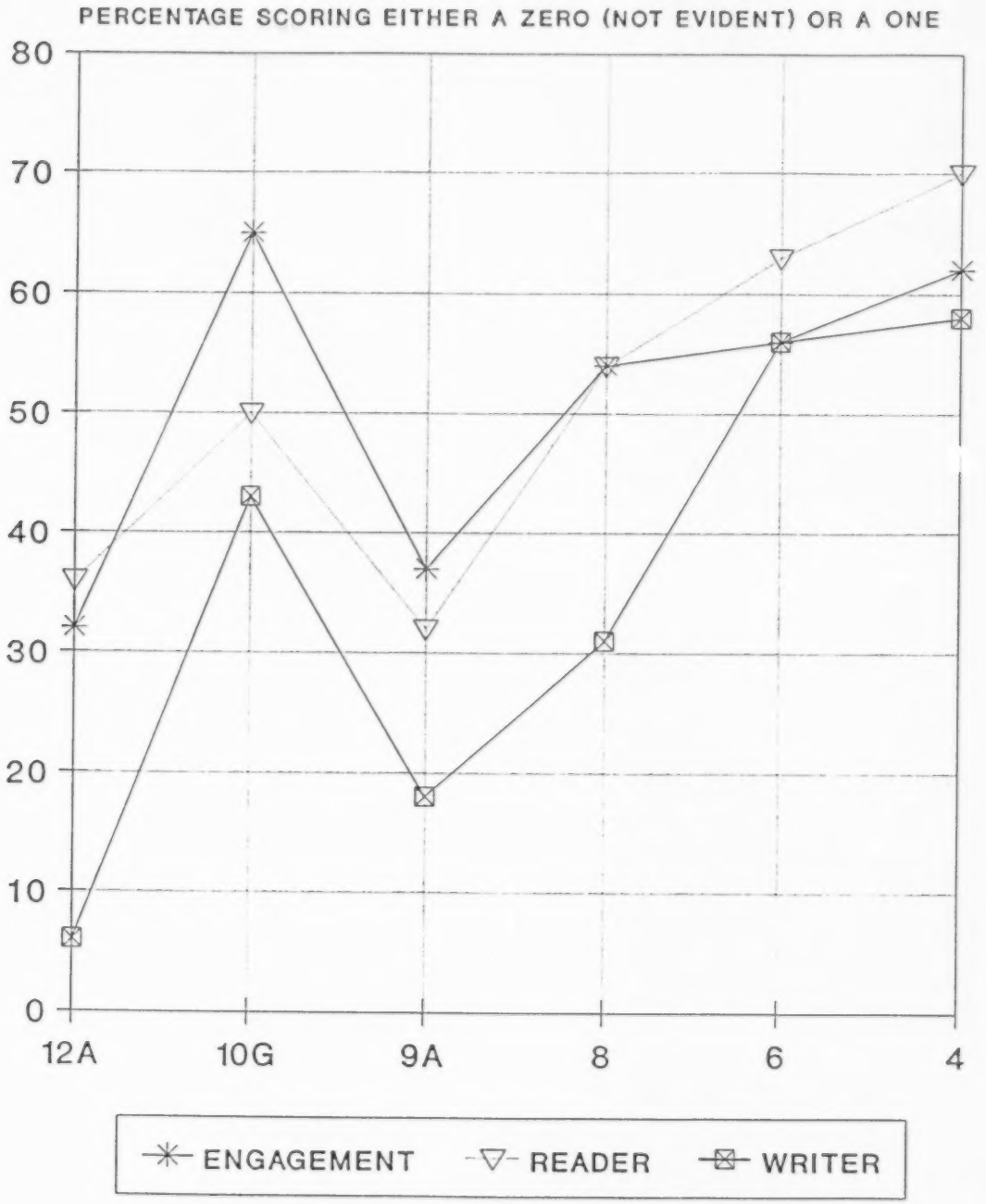
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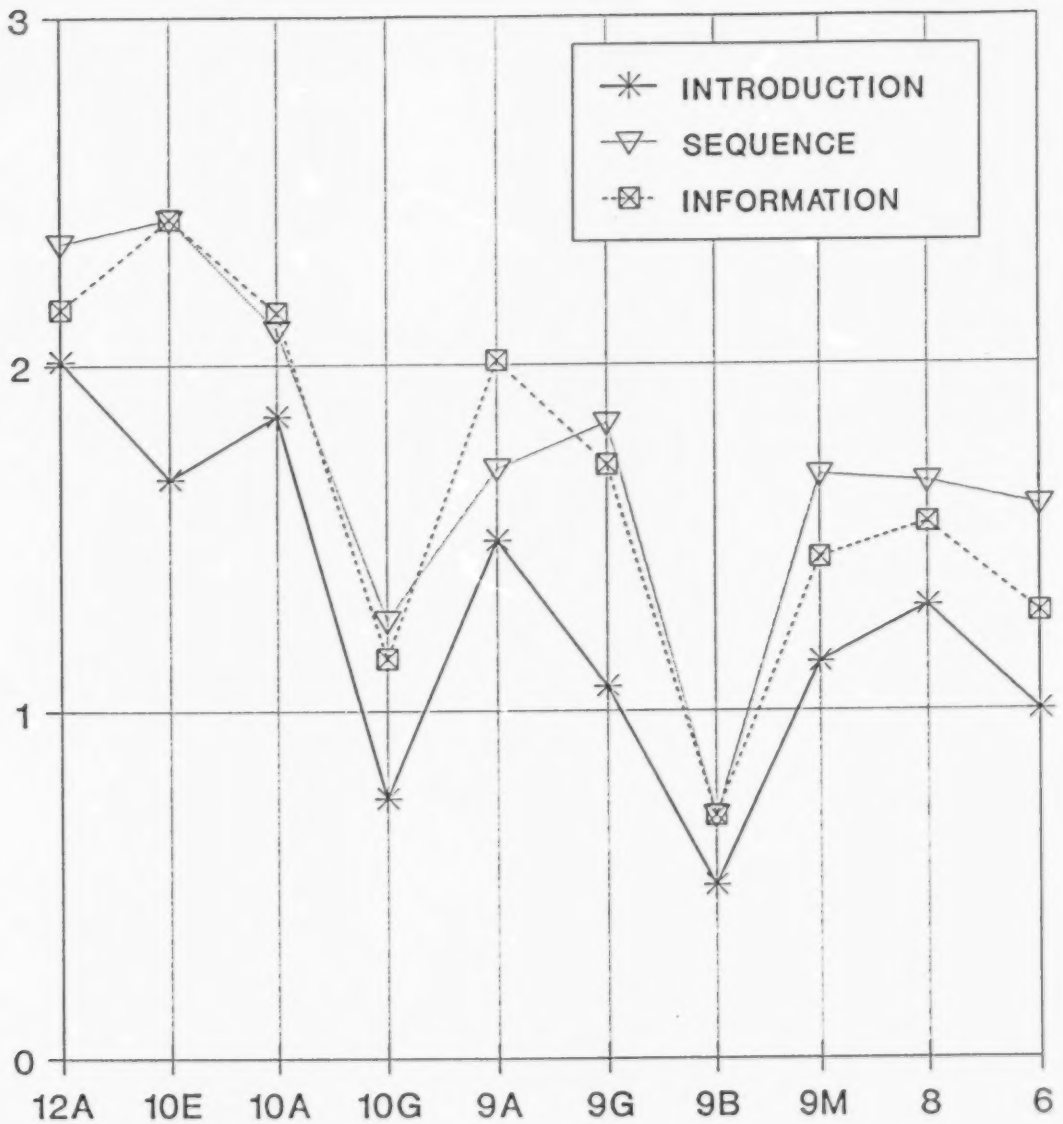
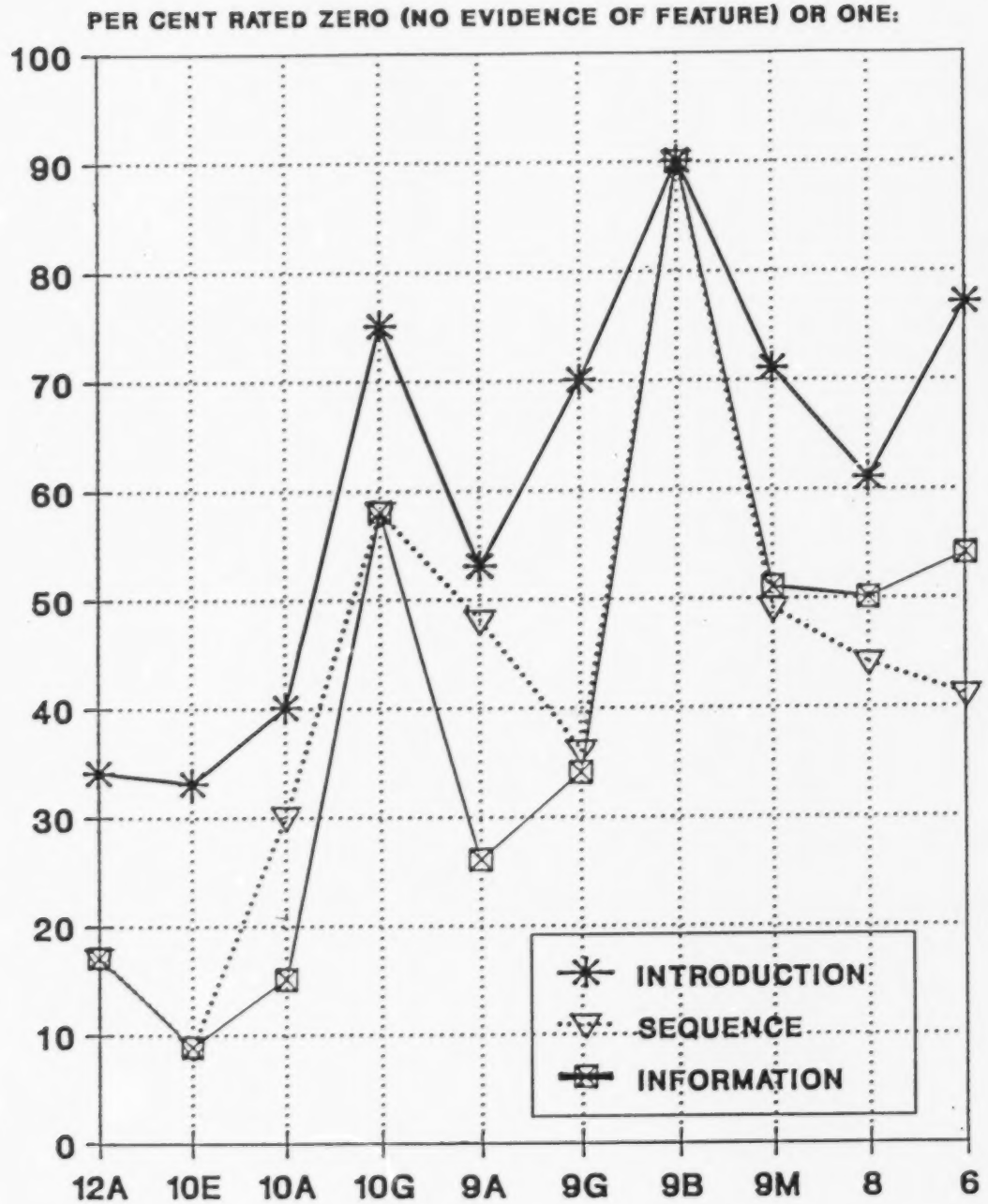
ENGAGEMENT
READER
WRITER

HOW TO SHOP

MEANS:



HOW TO SHOP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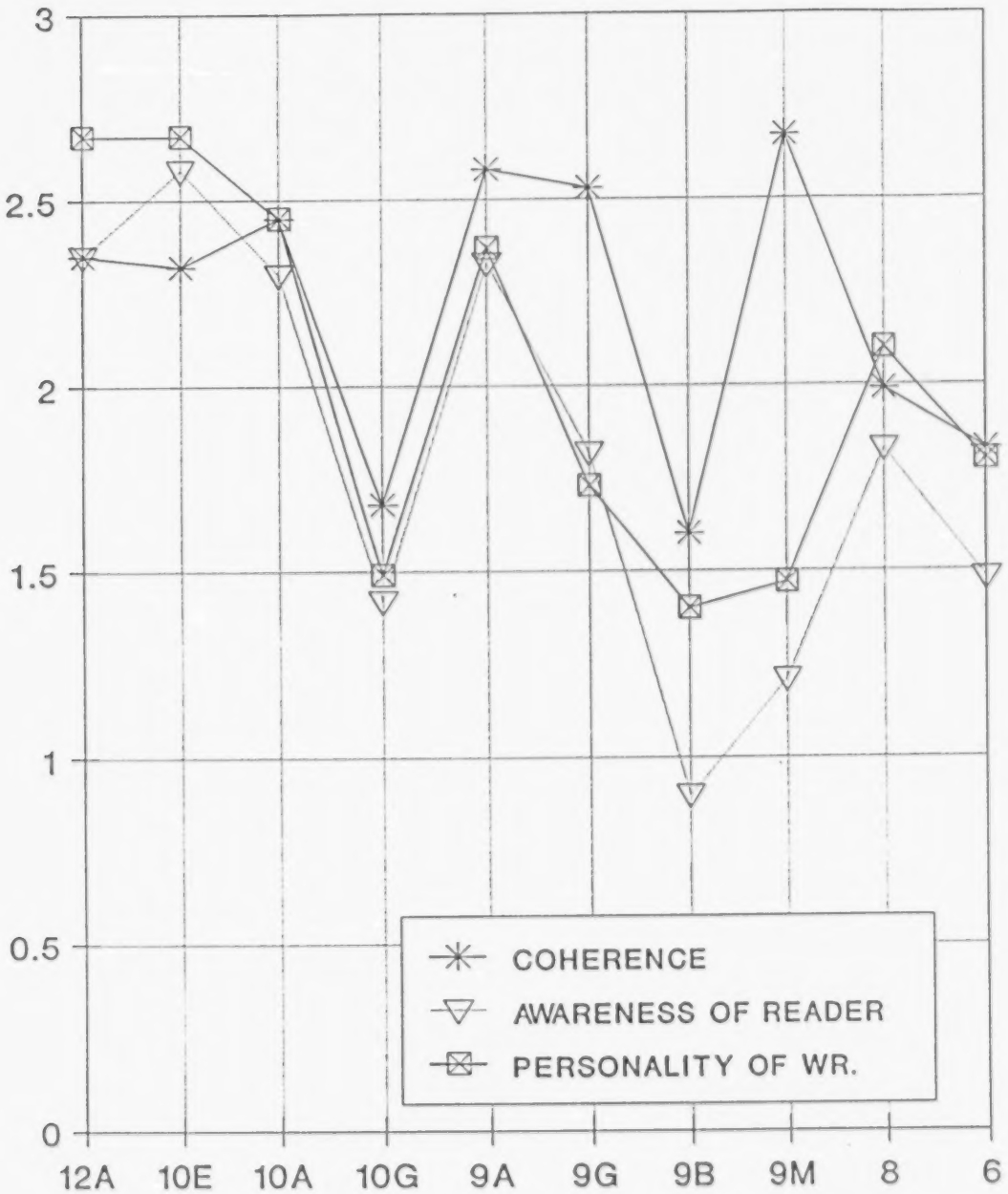
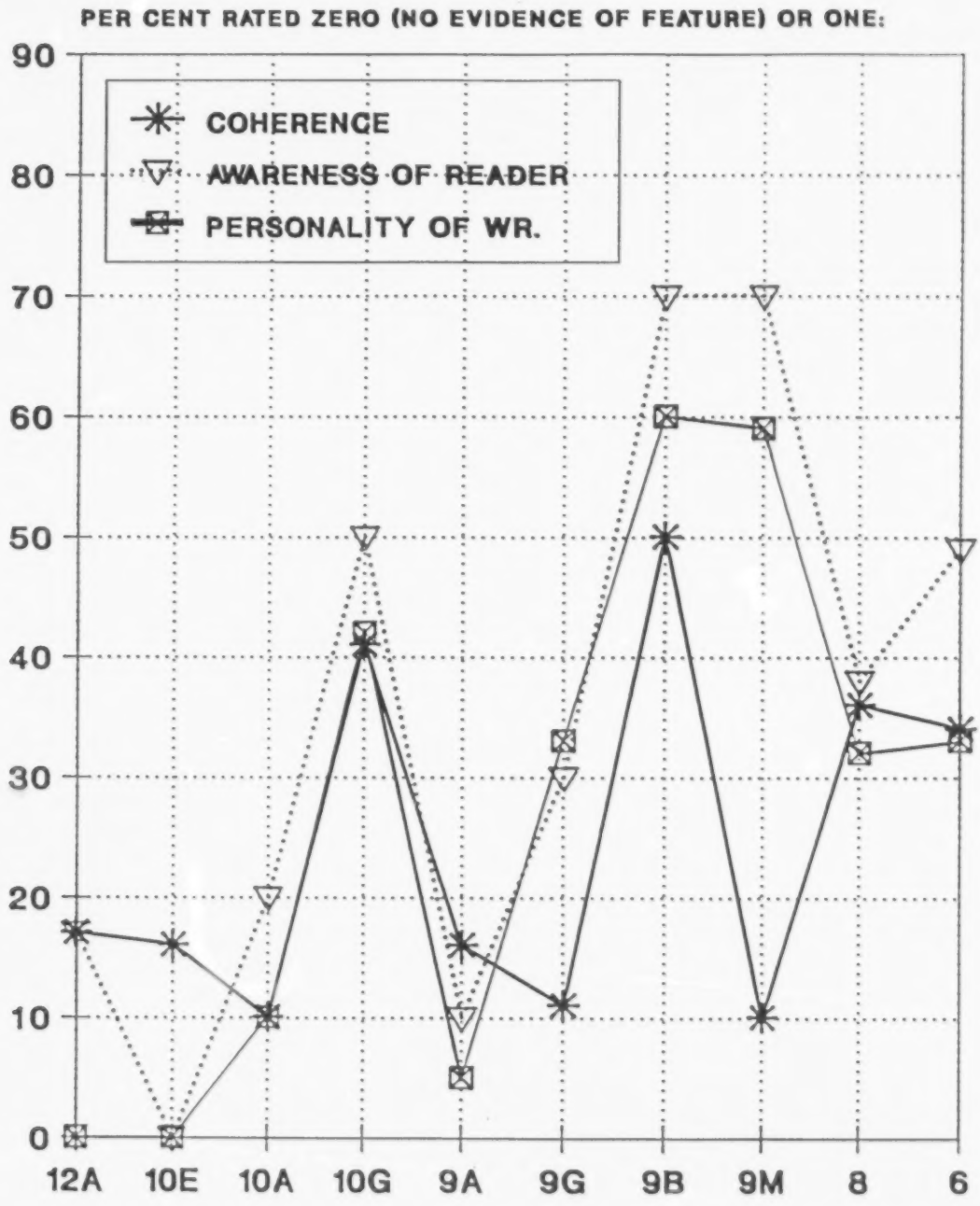
INTRODUCTION
SEQUENCE
INFORMATION

HOW TO SHOP

MEANS:



HOW TO SHOP


PER CENT RATED ZERO (NO EVIDENCE OF FEATURE) OR ONE:
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STAGES IN WRITING MATURATION

ERROR FREQUENCY STUDY: GRADES 4-10

Peter Evans

Because we had substantial numbers of essays at each of grades 4, 6, 8, 9 and 10 and at most levels in 9 and 10, personal narrative was chosen for the error counts.

The following is the sample on which the error count is based, with notation of average length. The very large standard deviations will indicate that essay length at any grade or level varied enormously. In 10 Advanced, for example, the shortest was 180 words and the longest, 760; in Grade 6 the shortest was 90 and the longest, 480.

SAMPLE AND AVERAGE LENGTH

	# WRITING	ESSAYS	AVE. LENGTH	STD. DEVIATION
10 Enriched	28	9 (of 9)	741	305
10 Advanced	125	19 (of 33)	344	164
10 General	100	23 (of 26)	280	181
9 Advanced	249	20 (of 29)	294	91
9 General	129	19 (of 30)	257	130
9 Basic	12	12 (of 12)	262	73
8	671	20 (of 78)	384	140
6	241	22 (of 49)	233	104
4	321	21 (of 45)	149	65

Where the number of essays employed in the descriptive analysis considerably exceeded twenty, a random subsample of about 20 essays was drawn; otherwise the complete set was used. The original sample for the descriptive analysis drawn from the four participating systems, was based on the distribution of holistic scenes obtained in the system's scoring: i.e. a random sample stratified by none.

It should be noted that, although conditions of writing were reasonably standard across classes and schools, there was likely some quiet variation. The Grade 10 Enriched students, who wrote on average much longer essays, appear to have been given more time to draft and revise.

Word counts are approximate per essay: no. of lines **x** average of the first several. As the intent was to determine frequency per hundred words across the "population", small inexactitudes were not considered important.

All error frequency reporting is based on the numbers noted above with the following two exceptions:

(1) Two Grade 4 essays revealed a total absence of sentence control - one consisting entirely of one run-on sentence. A "count" here would have been meaningless. Thus sentence error frequency at Gr. 4 is based on 19 essays.

(3) At Grade 6, three of the 22 essays contained 69 of the 155 spelling errors found in the whole set. The mean frequency is calculated, therefore, on 19 of the 22 at **2.05** error per hundred words. Were the additional three essays to be included, the frequency becomes **3.03**. The errors in these three essays are, however, included in the category breakdown.

IMAGINARY NUMBERS

In the tables and subsequent analysis one is speaking of averages. And it is true that, for the essays examined, the <u>average</u> error frequency per hundred words for sentence errors (Grade 9 Advanced) is 0.36 (i.e. about 1 for every 300 words). There is no "average" essay, however. The number of sentence errors per essay varies from zero (10 essays - one-half) to five, with <u>by essay</u> frequency per hundred as low as zero, obviously, and as high as 1.6. This illustration is perhaps the least extreme. There is a great deal more "wow" in other categories at other levels.

Whatever the grade or level there will be students who exhibit "mastery" - of the sentence, of spelling, of grammar; there will be others where control is precarious or absent. The application, then, of a generalization to the individual student, as a prediction of how he or she will perform is often quite inappropriate. It may seem trite, but it is generally true: the needs of the individual writer must be determined from what s/he actually does.

On the other hand there are several outcomes of importance in undertaking error counts and providing some generalizations:

(1) shifting patterns may be evident across grades/streams

(2) one may find a trend towards mastery of some "presumed" problem areas as students mature

(3) one may derive reasonable, practical expectations for a grade/level: expectations within the range of most.

(4) some widely held views of "non-achievement" (that most students can't write grammatically, can't write a sentence, etc.) are put into question.

(5) given general patterns and trends, one may identify more sharply where attention is best directed.

Concerning this last point for example, errors in use of the VERB account for between 30 and 55% of all grammar errors across all levels, while at no level does the problem of subject verb agreement account for more than 8% of all grammar errors.

Hence the generalized findings can be put to use in determining emphasis (when, how much) in program in establishing objectives, and in developing specific resource support. Cross-grade findings may also have bearing on decisions: if a particular problem largely disappears "on its own", perhaps deficiencies in early grades should be overlooked.

PARAGRAPHING

It is quite a routine presumption that an appropriately paragraphed essay is a signal of maturation. In composition text and programs of the past, some of these, perhaps, carrying into the present, there has been almost a fetish about "the paragraph" as opening with a topic sentence, etc. Research has long ago debunked the "<u>the</u> paragraph" myth and revealed considerable effective variation in paragraph construction and (implicit) rationale for divisions among very able contemporary authors. Certainly for <u>narrative</u>, as here, and for the particular topic, a category such as "topic sentence" will have uneven application. Dialogue aside, divisions are more likely to be chronological ones, ("After class...", "The next day...") with other divisions such as the event or event series (paragraph) followed by consequences (paragraph).

It was convenient, as these essays were being analyzed in detail anyhow, to add a "paragraph" check:

- How many paragraphs?
- Were divisions, assisting the reader to grasp the organization (chronologically, event/consequences, generalization/example) fairly consistently used?
- was some effort made but not consistently or helpfully maintained? [i.e. Did the writer have "some sense" of paragraphing?]
- were efforts non-existent (no paragraphing) or seemingly haphazard?

Because some writers used dialogue extensively for development, this check-off could not be consistently applied to all essays. And a few essays (stories) were so very short or under-developed that either (a) the content required no more than a paragraph or (b) one could not say with any certainty whether the writer had the skill in his/her repertoire. These essays (**a** and **b**) are deleted from the following counts:

PARAGRAPHING

	N	MUCH DIAL	N.P.(0)	2	3-5	6+	EFF.	MOD.	POOR/NIL
10E	9	2	1 (11%)	0	1	5	5	3	1
10A	19	1	3 (6%)	2	8	5	9	7	3
10G	22		12 (55%)	2	3	5	2	6	14
9A	19	1	7 (37%)	2	5	4	5	7	7
9G	18		6 (33%)	2	7	3	5	5	7
9B	12		7 (58%)	2	3	0	0	3	9
8	20	2	2 (10%)	4	4	7	7	7	6
6	21	1	8 (38%)	0	9	3	6	7	8
4	17		13 (76%)	1	3	0	3	1	13

(Four Grade 4 and one Grade 6 - too short for consideration here)

While it may certainly not be claimed that failure to paragraph or the barest attention to paragraphing is any absolute indicator of immaturity in writing (the writer <u>may</u> develop a sophisticated essay or story, soundly organized, but keep the "courtesy" divisions in his/her head, as it were), the patterns evident here do speak strongly of an association between maturation and the division of the story or essay into paragraphs.

A high percentage of <u>younger</u> writers (Grade 4) seem not to have the strategy in their repertoire; by Grade 6 one finds a dramatic improvement: about 75-80% at Grade 4 use the strategy poorly, if at all; this declines to 30-35% at Grade 6.

Both the 9 Basic level and the 10 General level fare poorly here also - not very much better than Grade 4. Hence paragraphing as an "index" of sorts of maturation is clearly not a matter of age - more likely of a more generic writing/thinking ability, perhaps, too, of a sensitivity to the reader's needs.

The dramatic growing fall-off at Grade 9 (these particular Advanced level essays falling slightly below 9 General!) is a puzzle. In one system from which these essays were derived a full grade 8-9 comparison of writing performance was made, Grade 8's scored holistically with Grade 9's. A finding of some concern was that there was very little discernible difference in the average

quality of writing between Grades 9 and 8. It was speculated in that context that the difficulties (A. Hargreaves: **The Rights of Passage**) encountered in the transition to secondary school produce some pause or fall-back in achievement. Possibly this index is one of the signals.

CATEGORIES OF ERROR AND PROCEDURES

Capitalization, minor punctuation, and punctuation of dialogue are not included in this analysis: the first because such errors have been found in past studies to be very infrequent (occasions for error in narrative also being few) and the last because dialogue is not employed in many of the essays. Concerning minor punctuation: there are so many conventions and so many "split-hair" points of disagreement over what would constitute an "error" that the effort is simply not worthwhile.

Errors in use of the apostrophe, excepting in **you're**, **they're**, **it's** as homophonic confusions in spelling, are also ignored.

The categories selected are **THE SENTENCE**, **GRAMMAR**, **SPELLING**.

SENTENCE:

1. The **NO SENTENCE ERROR**

2. The **FUSED SENTENCE** Subdivided into "sentences" run together with no punctuation and the "COMMA FAULT", "sentences" divided by only a comma. No coordinate conjunction.

3. The **RUN-ON SENTENCE** Ideas loosely tagged together with "and's" and "but's" (normally hav-ing at least 3 principal clauses very weakly associated or not associated).

4. **"OTHER":** Serious breakdown in parallelism, dangling participial constructions, etc. (Very few of these altogether; almost all sentence errors were identifiable as one of the first three types.)

NOTES:

(1) Students occasionally drop periods, or it is difficult (especially with photocopies) to determine whether a mark is a period or a comma. If the sentence following began with a capital letter, in this count it was assumed that

the writer had made a division between sentences even if no punctuation appeared. Hence when the first word in the next sentence was "I" or a person's name (initial capital), the student got the benefit of the doubt, and the frequency of the wholly "fused" sentence is likely a slight under-estimation.

(2) On the other hand, many usage handbooks indicate that a comma (rather than semi-colon or period) between two short, related principal clauses may be considered acceptable style. Hence, here, the count may have been overly severe.

(3) No occasions of use of the semi-colon, correctly or otherwise, are revealed. If it appeared at all, it was very infrequent.

GRAMMAR:

1. **THE VERB**

(a) **TENSE:** E.g. Sequence (as slips past/present/past), lack of past perfect when context clearly requires it, conditionals not used where required, or used where inappropriate.

(b) **SUBJECT-VERB** agreement

(c) **PRINCIPAL PARTS:** Chiefly the Old English strong "sing" verbs or transitional verbs ("bring"); occasionally a lost "-ed"; the lie/lay problem. "Of" for "have" (as in "He would of gone" classified here, though arguably it is a homophonic problem (sound of "would've").

2. **THE PRONOUN:** Case, Agreement, seriously ambiguous reference or lack of a reference (Antecedent problems), incorrect use of reflexive (as "John and myself are going.")

Exceptions: "Everyone...their"; "Who" for "whom" in the head position as in "Who did you go with?" Both are, if not standard usage now, close to it.

3. **CONJUNCTION/PREPOSITION:**

Howlers such as "off of" (quite rare), a preposition used as a conjunction (usually this was the substitution of "like" for "as"), non-idiomatic use of prepositions as "He went **in** the house", "He got me **in** trouble."

4. **"OTHER":** everything else, such as a seriously misplaced modifier, adjective used as adverb, double negative. (Not the split infinitive)

NOTES:

1. The conjunction/preposition category is most debatable. Is this grammar? "usage"?

   (a) Has the "like/as" distinction any likelihood of survival over the next 20 years anyhow? Quite routinely "like" replaces "as" even in The **Globe and Mail**. Certainly "as" is almost wholly displaced in oral language.

   (b) I regretted at one point my insistence on "I got into trouble" over "I got in trouble" even if technically I was right and the student wrong. Anyhow, I was too far along in my count to start all over again!

   In short, depending upon one's stance concerning language proprieties, the conjunction/preposition error frequency may be seen as exaggerated.

2. "OTHER" - Very few errors occurred here altogether. Three, as I recall, double negatives in about 180 essays. Most errors involved adverbs or adjective/adverb. I recall no instances of error across comparative/superlative.

SPELLING:

1. **HOMOPHONES** - words that sound alike or almost alike but with different spellings: e.g. to/too; steel/steal; no/know

2. **"LINK"** - words that the student separates when s/he should not or fails to separate when s/he should as "When ever"; "every body" (as "everyone"); "alot" (a chronic problem)

3. **"COMMON"** and 4. **"OTHER"**

   This division was far from scientific; it was not based on any word frequency table - just a judgement whether a word would likely be in "high frequency" use and frequently "seen" by the writer and peers, or whether it was a word that stretched a little beyond. A few samples, just to get a sense:

common	other
happen	pizza
before	swears
teacher	favourite

finally embarrassed

The "division" is entirely debatable.

NOTES:

1. Apostrophe errors are omitted rom the count except for you're/they're/it's when confused with their (there, they're) homophones.

2. Per essay, first occasion of a misspelling only.

3. "Alot", I swear, is the most frequent misspelling in the English language (students and teachers).

4. "ie/ei" is a problem we are unnecessarily excited about. I found about 4 instances of ie/ei in about 180 essays. On the other hand, "excited" was spelled "exited" in to-day's (Mar.16) **Globe**.

[Error counting is difficult and tedious. I aimed at all times at consistency of "call", though I probably strayed. And I probably slept through a number of errors. I am concerned however that the picture is accurate and "uncoloured" by judgements other than those specified above.]

The summary is provided is tabular form. Frequencies are per hundred words. This means for example, that a reported average frequency (Sentence, Grade 9 Advanced) of .36 means about 1 error per 300 words; the "No sentence error" at Grade 8 (.04) has a frequency of 1 in 2,500 words.

OBSERVATIONS (PRELIMINARY) ON THE ERROR COUNTS

THE OVERVIEW

1. At all grades spelling errors account for the highest percentage of errors.

   This finding is not remarkable when one considers that a sentence error can occur only "per sentence" (blocks of words) and that grammar errors are often associated with "configuration" of words and generally lock in on particular problem types, as for example the verb, of which there may be only one or two in a sentence.

2. There is some tendency among those who would likely be perceived to be weaker writers for sentence errors (as a percentage of all errors) to overtake and exceed grammar errors: 9G, 9B, 6 and 4 (an exception, however, 10A).

The "averaged" relative frequency of error types is a somewhat misleading index of performance, control, or "maturation" for at least these following reasons:

1. RELATIVE IMPORTANCE:

   (a) However irksome spelling errors may be they seldom interfere with meaning, and are not of themselves an indicator of the quality of thought and its management, or of the quality of style.

   (b) Some grammar "errors" ("like/as" for example) are far less serious than others and again bear little relationship to quality of thought and style. And even for the sentence, the "comma fault" error is now viewed less seriously than it was 15 or 20 years ago: short "sentences" broken by a comma are tolerated in the current (1990) **Globe and Mail Style Guide.**

   In short, some errors are more serious than others across the classifications and within them.

2. FREQUENCY AS A WEAK REPRESENTATION OF PROBLEMS: THE HYPOTHESIZED WRITER

   (a) AVERAGING - THE RANGE

   Averaging produces its own strange effects. We meet at Grade 8, for example, the average "student" who makes .66 sentence, .63 grammar, and 1.13 spelling errors per hundred words.

   The first problem is that the hypothesized student doesn't exist. In fact, in this sample, 4 students made no sentence errors at all, 4 no grammar errors, and 3 made only one spelling error - in essays ranging from about 300 to 600 words in length. At the other extreme there were a few who made many errors in one general category or other - a few without evident control of the sentence or of grammar or of spelling. The "averaged" picture is misleading.

   Further, the "average" suggests an association that may be very weak. It is evident as one examines essays, one by one, by category that over the grades there are a few students where "everything" is out of control or poorly managed and others where everything of the mechanical order is under control. It is not, however, true in general that poor spelling is a predictor of poor grammar or poor sentence structure, etc. One may as readily find in a grade level set, and these are examples from Grade

8, a student who has 5 grammar errors and only 1 sentence error or a student with 7 sentence errors and only 1 grammar error as find a student where all categories exhibit control or where all exhibit its lack.

(b) GENERALIZING - THE PROMPT AND OCCASION

The essays, or, rather, stories are not hypothetical. They are real, even though produced (as 2nd draft) under particular conditions that some might argue undermine authenticity. However in each case it is what the student in good mood or bad, in good health or poor, on a "creative" binge or not, did <u>then</u> for <u>this</u> prompt. What he or she would have done and the quality of what he or she would have produced a week later might, in many respects, have been quite different.

He or she might have (a) introduced quite other vocabulary including a number of words that s/he couldn't spell (and frequency of error goes "up" along with "creativity"), (b) introduced constructions separating subject and verb and thereby be more prone to subject-verb agreement errors, (c) introduced complex constructions (had the <u>mode</u> been different, as in argument) involving subordination, parallelism, etc. which might have revealed a lack of more sophisticated sentence control... Many things might be different.

One could safely predict, if the writer here has a high frequency of error in spelling common words, that on another occasion and the introduction of more complexity, matters ("frequency-count-wise") are, with high probability, going to be worse rather than better. But prediction would be problematic in the other direction: the writer who exhibits good control to-day may or may not, given more complexity of style or enlargement of vocabulary, "show" nearly as well to-morrow.

<u>Conclusion</u>: It is evident that "averaging" produces findings of little applicability at the individual level. Assistance must be tailored and based on needs that are evident - per student! Even then, what is produced on any one occasion is <u>unevenly</u> descriptive and predictive of the student's maturation and skill as a writer. Some basic strengths or some fundamental and likely chronic problems may be quite evident; others will not.

CONSTRUCTIVE PURPOSES IN ANALYSIS OF ERROR FREQUENCY

What then is the value in classifying and counting "errors" for various grades and levels?

The values of such an enterprise are at least four:

(1) THE POLITICAL:
What in general is really the case concerning students' control of the mechanics of writing?

(2) INSIGHTS CONCERNING DEVELOPMENT:
Are there in fact trends (one would hope positive ones) over-all in writing development with respect to control? What are these? What are the pedagogical implications?

(3) PROGRAM DESIGN AT THE GRADE/LEVEL:
One may make judgements, at least tentative ones, about where the focus might best be at different grades and levels.

(4) ESTABLISHMENT OF REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS:
One may, with respect to control of mechanics and paragraphing, as well as to other "positive features" of maturation determine reasonable standards of performance ("benchmarks", if you like) for particular grades and levels.

PARAGRAPHING

If we take "use of paragraphs" as a coarse index of the ability to organize coherently, the paragraph divisions signalling that:

(1) Clearly at Grade 4 relatively few (about 20%) of the students use paragraphing to any useful extent; the gain by Grade 6 is enormous, and by Grade 8 almost all students use paragraphing to some extent.

(2) Basic level Grade 9's and General level Grade 10's are both quite weak in their use of this strategy (about equally so in our sample) performing somewhat better than Grade 4 but far from as well as Grade 6.

(3) Grade 10 Advanced and Enriched do use paragraphing for the most part: i.e. it seems reasonable to claim, and to <u>expect</u>, as a performance feature that the Advanced Grade 10 student exhibit good paragraph control and management.

The curious case of Grade 9 Advanced and General (General sightly though probably not significantly better) as functioning circa Grade 6: Is our sampling somewhat at fault? Is there a fall-back in performance in the transition from Grade 8 to 9 owing either to the stress of transition or poor adaptation to differing pedagogical strategies? [We propose to consider a larger Grade 9 sample.]

"Quality" of paragraphing, where paragraphing was used, was also evaluated. Findings here do not change the general picture. Only one essay (a 9 Basic) where more than two paragraphs were used was judged to be poorly paragraphed. There were five or six instances across all essays (ca. 270) where a "two-paragrapher" was judged moderately successful in this respect; for the remainder, the judgement was "poorly".

One point of interest at Grade 4: the three multiparagraphed essays found were each judged "very successfully paragraphed": i.e. those who had "discovered" paragraphing did it well.

The percentages of 0 - 2 paragraph essays per grade/level (the three very short Grade 4's omitted):

10E-10%	9A-45%	8-30%
10A-26%	9G-42%	6-41%
10G-65%	9B-58%	4-83%

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS:

- Those students who employ paragraphing to any significant extent almost all reveal at least moderate effectiveness in the use of the strategy (at least in narrative).

- Paragraphing is little used at Grade 4; by Grade 6 about 60% and by Grade 8 about 70% employ the strategy.

- Advanced level Grade 10 largely have the strategy "under their belts".

- Absence of mastery of the strategy tends to characterize 10 General and 9 Basic.

The seeming "fall-back" at Grade 9 especially Advanced, requires further study.

IMPLICATIONS:

1. If employment of the strategy seems largely "naturally" to develop ca. Grade 5, this seems the most reasonable point to begin to press its importance on students (rather than at Grade 4).

2. It seems that the strategy ought to receive special reinforcement across Grade 9, and certainly be given considerable emphasis in General and Basic at Grades 9 and 10.

3. Proposed "expectations":

Grade 6: That students employ the strategy
Grade 8: That students employ the strategy effectively.
Grade 9: ?
Grade 10: That by this point Advanced level students exhibit mastery, and General & Basic exhibit use and reasonable control.

COMMENTARY ON ERROR FREQUENCIES

(All frequencies per hundred words unless otherwise stated)

Not all "errors" are equal. **"Like"** for **"as"** like in this sentence is certainly not as serious an error as repeated "No sentence" errors. And frequencies are not directly comparable either: an essay may contain 300 words (theoretically 300 opportunities to misspell) and only 20 sentences (the opportunity for error thus declining enormously). On both these counts an average frequency of **.8** for sentence errors signals a considerably more serious problem than a frequency of **1.1** for spelling. (These are the **10 General** means in the present study.) One suspects that most teachers of **10G** would be rather happy with a frequency of 1.1 for spelling, assuming they would (here read "will") believe it.

THE SENTENCE

1. (a) Frequency of error is halved or better at Grade 8 when 4's and 8's are compared.

(b) At Grade 9 Advanced the number halves again, though Grade 10 Advanced is close to the Grade 8 figure.

[If, however, we combined, using the samples on which errors were counted, 10 Enriched and 10 Advanced, the frequency is closer to .40 - i.e. equal to the 9A sample]

(c) Sentence errors are strikingly more frequent for Basic Level 9's (2 per hundred words or likely one error for every 6 or 7 sentences).

The nature of the "per system" sampling of writing at Grades 9 and 10 from which the subset of error count essays is drawn does not permit a valid estimate of frequency of sentence errors, or other categories of error, across "all 9's" or "all 10's" as compared with Grade 8 or 6.

It is evident that those with least sentence control "stream" into Basic level, and this "streaming" effect is evident for other categories as well.

2. The proportion of errors (of the categories selected) that are classified as sentence errors is quite stable across most grades and levels (ca 25-30%). At 10 Enriched the percentage is only 12 (and very few such errors altogether); at Grade 4 about 35%.

   (However, as previously noted, it is reasonable to consider sentence errors as more serious than errors in other categories.)

3. (a) The number of "No Sentence" errors is very small and, at all grades, constitute less than 20% of all sentence errors.

   Students, whether Grade 4 or Grade 10, can write a sentence!

   (b) The proportion of Run-On sentences is also low; less than 20% at all grades and levels; only 5% at Grade 6 and no such errors at all found in Grade 9 Advanced!

   (c) The fused and comma fault error is by far the most prevalent problem in all grades, accounting variously for between 64 and 80% of all sentence errors. This is a remarkably stable characteristic across all grades and levels.

4. **The most striking change across grades and levels is the shifting ratio between the wholly fused (no punctuation) and the "comma fault" sentence.** The ratios, expressed as a decimal fraction, of fused to comma fault are

Gr. 4	1.74	9 Basic 1.50	
6	2.68		
8	.61	9 Gen. .78	10 Gen. 1.00
		9 Adv. .23	10 Adv. .17
			10 Enr. NIL

A seeming general signal of increased maturation appears to be a striking decline in the fused sentence error. It heavily outnumbers the comma fault in a ratio of about 2:1 around Grades 4 and 6, and virtually disappears at the Advanced Level in Grades 9 and 10.

A NOTE ON EXTENSIVENESS OF SENTENCE PROBLEMS:

It has already been noted that there is no "average" essay to accommodate the average frequency of error at any grade or level. Individual students may reveal an almost complete lack of control; others, almost total control.

It may be salutary therefore to note the percentage of essays by Grade and Level where control and total lack of control are exhibited. Control is defined here as less than one error and lack of control is defined as "greater than 2 errors", each per hundred words.

SENTENCE CONTROL
%

	N	CONTROL	LACKING CONTROL
10E	9	100	0
10A	19	58	0
10G	23	48	13
9A	20	65	0
9G	19	42	19
9B	12	8	42
8	20	45	5
6	22	23	18
4	21	24	33

That is, the trend to bringing the sentence under reasonable or excellent control is quite pronounced as students advance through the grades, with, however, the poorest managers clustering in the Basic level.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS:

As far as the pattern can be consistently traced, the frequency of sentence errors declines as one moves up the grades, with, however, sentence problems remaining a serious matter for the Basic level student at Grade 9 and to a somewhat lesser extent the General level student.

Assumptions that appear to be widely held, that students have difficulty writing a sentence and that students tend to let their sentences ramble on and on are, on the evidence, disproven. These are not, globally at least, serious problems; students can and routinely do produce complete "thought units".

The problem is that many have not "inhaled" the code for written discourse of the end punctuation marks. It is clear as one proceeds up the grades that more and more students recognize the need to signal a pause or break between thoughts, though frequently the comma (less appropriate and usually inappropriate) rather than the period is employed.

This "transition", if you will, from frequent "no punctuation" to frequent comma to replacement by the period seems to be a useful index of maturation in sentence management - the first stage of that transition almost wholly effected by Grade 9 Advanced level students, and very poorly so by many Basic level students.

IMPLICATIONS:

1. The emphasis in past and perhaps some current writing programs on the "No sentence" and the "run-on sentence" error seems evidently misplaced.

2. A fairly high frequency of comma-fault and fused sentences may be expected at the Junior (Grade 4-6) division, with a fairly dramatic decline in the latter by most students by Grade 8.

   This may well be part of a "natural" transition to the conventions of written discourse, one that should be encouraged strongly. (This might be achieved in part by having students with the problem read their own work aloud and note the natural "break" points.)

3. It would seem reasonable to set as an expectation for the writer at Grade 8 the elimination of the fused sentence. The comma fault may take longer to eradicate. And, as noted previously, a comma division between short and closely related thought units is becoming more widely tolerated as acceptable style anyhow. The dividing line between "error" and acceptable style is becoming more and more difficult to draw.

SPELLING

Spelling errors, understandably, account for the largest percentage of the three classifications at all grades and levels - between 40 and 55% of all errors.

Their frequency by grade and level patterns almost exactly that for sentence errors excepting a slight increase rather than a slight decrease from Gr. 4-6. The difference would appear to non-significant both statistically and practically. Average frequency approximately halves as we contrast Grades 4-6 with 8-9 Adv. - 10 Adv. - 10 General (and 9 General is not far out of line). In Basic level 9 one finds poor spelling control very highly concentrated.

Spelling, unlike the sentence, is not conducive to straightforward generalizations. A reduction from an average frequency of 2 (Gr. 6) to 1.1 (Grade 8) is "nice", and most teachers would be satisfied with students who, in at best second draft writing, were were making an error only every hundred or so words. On the other hand, obviously, one cannot count or appraise errors in words students did not use. Students may avoid words they are uncertain of, and a low error frequency may signal the student unwilling to take creative risks, unwilling or unready to expand his/her vocabulary. Hence, whatever our "pick-up" here, the picture is very incomplete.

As a partial response to this problem, errors have been classified roughly into four types:

HOMOPHONES: as you're/your, break/brake

LINK: words run together or split inappropriately "alot", "When ever I go ..."

COMMON: high frequency "fundamental" vocabulary

OTHER: everything else

These last two categories are very loose but perhaps help a little in sensing whether spelling difficulties are deeply entrenched or whether they are chiefly associated with words not as frequently encountered in print, or newer vocabulary. It would seem that strategies directed to the "common words" problem should differ from those directed to newer vocabulary.

CATEGORY PATTERNS:

1. Excepting 9 Basic (at 23%), "Homophones" and "Link" errors account for over, at some grades/levels well over, a quarter of all spelling errors.

2. Excepting 9B and Grade 4, the contribution of these two error-types, percentagewise, is about equal. (Grade 4's have a more severe problem with link words; 9 Basic with homophones.)

3. Excepting 10E (where both the number of essays and the total number of errors found were small) and Grade 8, errors in words from common vocabulary capture a large percentage of the "error market": between 32 and 52 per cent.

A NOTE ON THE EXTENSIVENESS OF SPELLING PROBLEMS:

"Spelling control" here is defined as less than 1 error per hundred words; "out of control" as greater than 3 errors per hundred words.

SPELLING CONTROL

%

	N	CONTROL	"OUT OF CONTROL"	
10E	9	100	0	
10A	19	63	5	
10G	23	43	4	
9A	20	75	0	
9G	19	37	21	
9B	12	0	58	
8	20	40	5	
6	22	32	50	(enormous variability)
4	21	38	14	

Grade 6 provides a dramatic contrast between spellers and non-spellers. The contrast largely disappears in Grade 8.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Beyond a general decline in error frequency (excepting Basic 9) as students advance through the grades, no striking trend appears across grades and levels that would aid in a determination of stages in maturation. Certainly there is at Grade 8, 9 (in all but Basic) and 10 a drastic reduction in the number of "out of control" spellers. This might be converted into a goal of sorts were it not also the discovery that (conceding the very limited sample) the "out of control" spellers do turn up - in the Basic level. One fears therefore that a proposed criterion of achievement tied to spelling performance is more likely to exacerbate the streaming situation than produce better spellers.

There do, however appear to be two quite specific targets that might be attacked globally.

The "link word" and "homophone" problems account for a very significant percentage of all errors, and continue as a seemingly chronic into Grade 10. Perhaps these targets deserve special attention, and perhaps early rather than late. They show no "inclination" to disappear. In the writing of what may be presumed to be the most able group (10 Enriched) they together account for 57% of all spelling errors.

Mention should again be made of "alot" which alone accounted for 20% of the "link" errors across the entire spectrum of grades and levels.

A target less specific is the "common vocabulary" problem. As previously noted, my classification was loose and probably inconsistent. A cynic might add, "Sure, and if the words are 'common' they are more often used, so you're certain to turn up a higher percentage frequency." My only rejoinder here is this: That's where errors are occurring and many of them are not "pattern" problems as ocuring? occuring? ocurring? occurring! (Try "harassment" and "embarrassment.") They seem to constitute a reasonably limited set for systematic attention on an individual basis.

I did not attempt a listing of the "common" and "other" words misspelled. An earlier effort with NWT writing produced a very long list of one- or two-occasion misspellings, and I suspect I would have got the same here. I recall that those "embarrassed" by the troublemaker almost all produced an embarrassing spelling of the word; I also recall only 3 or 4 instances of **ie/ei** confusions across the ca. 120 essays. If there is a generalization to be made across the common and extended vocabulary range - the chief and chronic problem is the "consonant doubling" issue particularly in relation to prefix and suffix. That is a "gestalt" - one that it may be unecessary? unnecessary! to underline.

I do recognize limitations here: of words students may have avoided because they were uncertain of the spelling, and of the limitations of the mode and the prompt with the further restriction or definition the individual writer gave it - thereby limiting vocabulary. The picture is indeed partial. Had students been asked to present the case concerning youthenasia? euthanasia! instead, the pattern of errors, the actual words misspelled, and indeed the frequencies might have been very different.

EXPECTATIONS AND PEDAGOGY:

It is evidently "reasonable" (empirically so on this sample) to expect student error frequency in "familiar" writing to fall below 3 errors per hundred words by the end of Grade 8. It is also reasonable to assume, again with empirical support, that the chronic bugbears as "to, too", "your, you're" are not going to be eliminated easily for those students having trouble with them.

Apart from reduction in frequency of error in the absolute sense and the reduction (saving Basic 9) in the number of "out of control" spellers, there appears to be little link between patterns discernible here and writing "maturation", and probably we should not expect one.

Some educators may well argue that to harp on spelling is likely to produce two negative effects: the discouragement of the student who finds red circles all over his/her essay, and the avoidance of creativity and experimentation with the "risking" of new vocabulary. Some may well argue, as well, that spelling correctness is a good deal less important that other features of writing and, anyhow, "spell-checkers" in computer programs are rendering the spelling fetish obsolete. [That won't catch the homophone or most word-split problems, though.]

Hence pedagogical suggestions are few and brief:

1. It does seem worthwhile, perhaps especially since technology cannot help here, to focus at a quite early stage (Grade 5-6) on homophone problems.

2. The word-split problem perhaps should also be addressed starting at Grade 4 where it is already prevalent. "Alot" is its own special case, but many other misfires are a matter of the ear and emphasis. They could be encountered with humour in an oral context:

> Someone was throwing paper airplanes, so the teacher demanded to see <u>every</u> <u>one</u> of us after school, and <u>everyone</u> is going to show up.

   Students could even write a little play employing (both ways) link and unlinked pairs!

3. Through word study and the building up from roots with different affixes as "un-", "-ly", "-ess", "-ing" there may be some induction of rules for consonant doubling and dropping of the final "-e". (Good luck with "-ance" and "-ence"!)
   This, from time to time.

4. The common practice of having students keep track of their <u>own</u> demons seems sensible.

What does not seem sensible are spelling drills with random lists of words that (a) students have little further use for, (b) may not be a problem for most students in the first place. This, however, is not news. I hope ...

> **My son, aged 8, last October came home with his weekly dictees [he gets one weekly in both French and English - a benefit of the Immersion program]: words for All Hallows Eve. So after as little drilling as he could manage to escape with, he went to English Language Arts (?), wrote "Halloween", and fell out of favour. So, sadder but wiser, he went to French Language Arts the next day, wrote "Hallowe'en", and caught hell again. Mercifully, he won't need either until next October, same time, next station.**
>
> [The foregoing may be obscure to unilingual persons. The correct English spelling, as we all know, is with the apostrophe. The correct French spelling is without. Anyone for Biftek?]

GRAMMAR

The percentage of errors classified as grammar varies greatly across grades and levels - from only 17% at 9 Basic (overwhelmed by spelling) up to 40% at 10 Enriched.

Frequency per hundred words is constant at Grades 4 and 6 (**.9**) declining by a third at Grade 8 and exhibiting only slight further decline at Grade 9 Advanced. For only 9 Basic at **1.2** does the frequency exceed one error per hundred words.

It should also be recalled that I "stretched" grammar errors to include inappropriate prepositional use (really a matter of diction or idiom); consequently, frequencies, if grammar is considered strictly, are slightly inflated. And "like" for "as" (20 instances) accounted for 29% of all conjunction/preposition errors!

The collective picture: Frequencies close to **one** at Grade 4, 6, 9 General, and 10 General and slightly above at 9 Basic. Frequencies closer to **.5** (about one error for every 200 words) at Grades 8, 9 Advanced and 10 Advanced; **one** in 400 words at 10 Enriched.

ERRORS BY CLASSIFICATION:

A basic division was made between errors involving the verb and all other grammar errors. The former accounted for anywhere between 28% (Grade 4) and 58% (Grade 8) of the grammar errors, the percentage exceeding 40 for all but 10 Enriched and Grade 4.

THE VERB:

1. Errors in subject-verb agreement were rare, at no grade or level exceeding an average frequency of **.08**. No such errors were found at all in 9 Basic, 9 Advanced or 10 Enriched.

2. Errors in tense and tense sequence across <u>all</u> grades and levels accounted for **25%** of <u>all grammar errors</u> (give or take 5%).

3. Errors in principal parts of the irregular verbs, excepting Grade 4 where (oddly) none were found, ran at about **20%** of <u>all</u> grammar errors for most grades/streams.

THE PRONOUN:

Here one finds considerable variation (and no pattern) as a percentage of grammar errors: almost no such errors at 10 General, but about 20% at 9A for example. The problem was usually of case: the objective form ("Me and my buddies were") as subject.

CONJUNCTION/PREPOSITION:

Partly because of the frequency of the "like/as" problem and partly because of my expansion of the category to include idiomatic misuse of the preposition, this category carves out a substantial percentage (variously between 10 and 30%) at all grades and levels except 9B where pronoun errors supervene. Again there is no seeming cross-grade pattern or trend.

"OTHER" GRAMMAR: Adjectives as adverbs, misplaced modifiers, etc.

Their contribution to the total error count (excepting Grade 4 where such errors were very infrequent) ran at about 10-20% quite consistently across grades and levels.

THE EXTENSIVENESS OF GRAMMAR PROBLEMS

Grammatical control is defined here as less than one error per hundred words, and its lack as greater than two. If these definitions are perceived as generous (which they may be) as well as arbitrary (which they are), recall that within "grammar" is included idiomatic misuse of prepositions.

GRAMMATICAL CONTROL
%

	N	CONTROL	LACKING CONTROL
10E	9	100	0
10A	19	89	0
10G	23	61	4
9A	20	80	0
9G	19	42	11
9B	12	58	17
8	20	80	5
6	22	68	18
4	21	62	10

It will be evident when these data are compared with "SENTENCE" and "SPELLING" that very few students at all (any grade or level) could be characterized as revealing serious difficulties here. In general grammatical control is not an issue in this writing in this mode at any grade or level either collectively or, to any great extent, for individual students.

CONCLUSIONS

The widely held perception that students in general cannot write grammatically seems thoroughly undermined by these findings. Further, relatively few individual students reveal a serious problem.

Where frequency over-all is low it is difficult to select targets that constitute serious difficulty. While "tense", for example, makes up a large percentage of verb errors, the actual incidence of error remains fairly low. Clearly subject-verb agreement is not a problem.

The higher incidence of "tense" errors is partly the result of the prompt itself: "Trouble always starts when" beginning with the characteristic situation where the present tense is in order. And as long as the student writes about what the troublemaker "does", the present tense remains in order. The tricky part comes when the writer shifts to specific (past event) illustrations; some students are not consistent in making the appropriate shift.

The principal problems that did emerge were

(1) tense as noted above (shifts)
(2) additional conditionals "If he would have ..., he would have"
(3) principal parts of irregular verbs
(4) the use of objective case as subject (pronouns)
(5) "like" for "as"

the last reflecting a shift in practice. The "error" is rapidly becoming accepted usage.

EXPECTATIONS AND PEDAGOGY:

The general infrequency of errors and absence of any clear trend that could be perceived as signals of maturation suggest both that a blitz on grammar is quite unnecessary and that a blitz on even the more common of the problems would have little significant general benefit.

One may expect to find errors more frequently associated with the verb. Units on tense sequence, particularly associated with writing in this mode, may be of some value; certainly the problem should be explored in writing contexts.

Otherwise, recurrent problems as revealed in the writing of individual students are probably best addressed on an individual basis.

The trend, as far as <u>this</u> prompt reveals, is for substantial improvement between Grade 6 and Grade 8. Perhaps in later grades either a more sophisticated sentence style or structures not evident here but called forth by other writing modes would result in an increased frequency of error - but for different kinds and levels of problems.

ERROR FREQUENCY (per 100 WORDS)

(1) ACROSS CATEGORIES:

	SENTENCE	SPELLING	GRAMMAR	(VERB as % OF GR.)
10E	.07	.31	.25	35%
10A	.60	.93	.47	42
10G	.79	1.07	.89	49
9A	.36	.68	.54	41
9G	1.10	1.39	.98	46
9B	2.04	3.95	1.21	55
8	.66	1.13	.63	58
6	1.29	2.04**	.92	46
4	1.53*	1.82	.93	28

* Two essays that are a long running sentence not included.

** 3 essays contained 69 of the 155 errors. These have been removed. Were they included the frequency would rise to 3.03.

ERROR FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION

THE SENTENCE

	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	8	6	4
AS % OF TOTAL ERRORS:	**12**	**30**	**29**	**23**	**32**	**28**	**27**	**25**	**35**
TOTAL FREQUENCY/100w:	.07	.60	.79	.36	1.10	2.04	.66	.29	1.53
NO SENTENCE: f	.01	.08	.11	.07	.16	.22	.04	.12	.17
(of all sentence) %	**20**	**13**	**14**	**19**	**15**	**11**	**06**	**09**	**11**
FUSED TOTAL: f	.06	.41	.56	.27	.71	1.43	.55	1.05	1.13
(of all sentence) %	**80**	**69**	**71**	**76**	**65**	**70**	**82**	**82**	**74**
NO PUNC. AS % OF FUSED:	NIL	15	50	19	43	60	38	72	64
RUN-ON: f	NIL	.08	.12	NIL	.18	.32	.05	.06	.20
(of all sentence) %	-	**13**	**16**	-	**17**	**16**	**08**	**05**	**13**
OTHER: f	NIL	.03	NIL	.02	.04	.06	.03	.06	.03
(of all sentence) %	-	**05**	-	**05**	**04**	**03**	**04**	**05**	**02**

ERROR FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION

SPELLING

	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	8	6	4
AS % OF ALL ERRORS:	**49**	**47**	**39**	**43**	**40**	**55**	**47**	**46***	**43**
TOTAL FREQUENCY/100w:	.31	.93	1.07	.68	1.39	3.95	1.13	2.04*	1.82
HOMOPHONES: f	.10	.17	.22	.15	.25	.57	.20	.49	.10
(of all spelling) %	**33**	**18**	**19**	**22**	**18**	**15**	**17**	**16**	**05**
"LINK": f	.07	.12	.20	.12	.25	.32	.17	.37	.38
(of all spelling) %	**24**	**13**	**18**	**18**	**18**	**08**	**15**	**12**	**21**
"COMMON": f	.06	.35	.36	.26	.49	1.66	.29	1.58	.80
(of all spelling) %	**19**	**38**	**32**	**38**	**35**	**43**	**25**	**52**	**44**
OTHER: f	.07	.29	.36	.15	.41	1.40	.48	.59	.54
(of all spelling) %	**24**	**31**	**32**	**22**	**29**	**35**	**43**	**19**	**29**

* Deleting the 3 essays that accounted for 45% of the errors found in all 22 essays. Spelling would account for 58% of all errors were these three essays included.

" ALOT" for "A LOT":

No instances in 9G or 9B
1 (of 5 "link" errors) - 10E
1 (of 8 "link" errors) - 10A
5 (of 13 "link" errors) - 10G
2 (of 7 "link" errors) - 9A
2 (of 13 "link" errors) - 8
4 (of 19 "link" errors) - 6
2 (of 12 "link" errors) - 4

"LIKE" for "AS" (CONJ/PREP. CATEGORY):

10E = 4 of 6 ERRORS
10A = 1 of 7
10G = 7 0f 20
9A = 3 of 13
9G = 2 OF 9
9B = nil
8 = 1 of 7
6 = nil
4 = 2 of 10

ERROR FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION

GRAMMAR

	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	8	6	4
GRAMMAR AS % OF ALL ERRORS:	**40**	**24**	**32**	**34**	**28**	**17**	**26**	**18**	**22**
VERB: TOTAL FREQUENCY/100w:	.09	.20	.43	.22	.45	.67	.37	.43	.26
AS % OF ALL GRAMMAR:	**36**	**42**	**49**	**41**	**47**	**55**	**59**	**47**	**28**
TENSE: f	.04	.09	.20	.14	.27	.35	.22	.18	.22
(of all VERB) %	**50**	**46**	**46**	**62**	**59**	**52**	**61**	**41**	**88**
SUBJ-VERB: f	NIL	.03	.05	NIL	.08	NIL	.03	.06	.03
(of all VERB) %	**-**	**15**	**11**	**-**	**18**	**-**	**07**	**14**	**12**
PRINCIPAL PARTS: f	.04	.08	.19	.09	.10	.32	.12	.20	NIL
(of all VERB) %	**50**	**38**	**43**	**38**	**23**	**48**	**32**	**45**	**-**
GRAMMAR EXCEPT VERB f/100W:	.16	.28	.45	.32	.53	.54	.26	.49	.67
PRONOUN: f	.04	.09	.02	.05	.20	.32	.09	.14	.32
(of all Gr. exc. Vb) %	**25**	**32**	**04**	**16**	**38**	**59**	**35**	**29**	**48**
CONJUNC/PREPOS. f	.09	.11	.31	.22	.18	.06	.09	.18	.32
(of all Gr. exc. Vb) %	**56**	**39**	**69**	**69**	**34**	**11**	**35**	**37**	**48**
"OTHER": f	.03	.08	.12	.05	.14	.16	.08	.18	.03
(of all Gr. exc. Vb) %	**19**	**29**	**27**	**16**	**26**	**30**	**31**	**37**	**04**